ZECHARIA SITCHIN

Bestselling author of *The 12th Planet*

THE KING WHO REFUSED TO DIE

THE ANUNNAKI AND THE SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY

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ZECHARIA SITCHIN

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Contents

Cover Image

Title Page

Publisher's Preface

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

About the Author

About Inner Traditions • Bear & Company

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

The King Who Refused to Die. The title of the book in your hands describes our author, and dear friend, Zecharia Sitchin. In 2010 he left this world, but his indomitable spirit lives on, through his astonishing legacy of research and the fourteen books he wrote.

Our publishing partnership with Zecharia exemplified the classic "good old" days when authors and editors would discuss the nuances of each word choice and how to make the reading experience as engaging as possible.

Zecharia was a consummate wordsmith and a gifted storyteller. He understood the importance of rhythm and the need to bring readers along on his explorations into the ancient past, detail by detail—never giving the ending away too soon—so they would come to the same conclusions as he did. It was important to Zecharia that readers participate in the discovery experience, for only then could they come to appreciate the true revelations contained in his work.

With Zecharia's passing we lost an author who represented another time and place. And yet . . . with his classic flair for the dramatic and sense of mystery, he left us a gift—another work that he had never published!

The King Who Refused to Die is Zecharia's first work to be published posthumously and is his first work of fiction. Although it is written in classic story form, it reveals the basis of Zecharia's unique historical perspective: that "There were giants upon the Earth in those days and also thereafter, too." In this retelling of the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* he shows how the history of mankind on Earth is deeply influenced by visitations from the Anunnaki, the inhabitants of the 12th Planet, Nibiru, "Those Who From Heaven to Earth Came."

Zecharia spent 35 years developing his theories of the Anunnaki influence on Earth. He traveled around the world viewing artifacts, deciphering 5,000-year-old Sumerian and Akkadian clay tablets, and

creating a legacy of research that has inspired another generation to take up his work. The depth of his scholarship is awe-inspiring, but more than that, his desire to enliven his theories and bring them into popular consciousness defined the final chapter of his life.

We are honored to have a chance to continue our work with Zecharia through his latest literary creation. Yes, Zecharia Sitchin is The King Who Refused to Die.

1

“For the special exhibit, Ma’am?”

The question startled Astra. She had been to the museum many times before, but never so late in the evening. This time she stopped at the iron gates, awed by the sight of the museum’s columned facade lit by ground spotlights that bathed it in amber. The light drizzle added a haziness to the sight, an air of mystery—as though there was a secret, golden as the amber lights, hidden behind the massive columns. Astra wondered, as she stood mesmerized by the sight, whether the eerie appearance was due to the fact that so many of the museum’s artifacts had come from ancient burial sites.

“For the special exhibit, Ma’am?” the gatekeeper repeated his question, stepping out of the guard booth into the drizzle.

“Why, yes,” Astra replied.

“You have to show your invitation,” he said, blocking her way.

“Ah yes, the invitation,” Astra muttered.

The gatekeeper watched her as she fumbled in her large handbag. He could make out, under the khaki rain hat, a squarish chin and a small, full-lipped mouth. Her khaki raincoat was belted tightly around her waist, revealing a well-shaped body.

“Here it is,” Astra said as she pulled the white card out of the envelope in which it had been mailed to her.

“Go on,” the gatekeeper said without even examining the card. “You’re rather late. If you don’t hurry, the wine and tidbits will be all gone.”

Astra was still clutching the invitation in her hand as she began to cross the courtyard, too absorbed in thoughts to remember to put it back in her handbag. By now she knew the words of the invitation by heart—“The Trustees of the British Museum cordially invite you to attend the opening of the Special Gilgamesh Exhibit,” it read, giving the date and time. But even now, as she was mounting the twelve

wide stairs leading to the museum's front doors, Astra could not figure out why she had been invited, or who it was that knew her name and address.

She was still thinking how odd it all was when one of the guards stopped her to search her handbag, and only then did she remember to put back the invitation. Satisfied that she had neither guns nor explosives, he directed her to the west wing. She checked her hat and coat, and a moment later joined the crowd.

For the occasion, the museum's coffee shop had been converted into a reception hall, where free drinks and small triangular sandwiches were being served. The way to the reception led through corridor-like galleries lined with Greek statues and up a flight of stairs, from which the crowd was already spilling out into the exhibition galleries. As Astra tried to make her way to the bar, she found herself stuck amidst the throng. She was pushed and shoved on all sides but finally managed to maneuver herself nearer to the wall, where the crush of people was not as great.

From that vantage point she looked about her. It was now long past the usual closing time, and the everyday crowds of sightseers had given way to a totally different assemblage of people. Though only a few men wore black tie and even fewer women wore long gowns, the crowd looked elegant, sophisticated. As she overheard fleeting conversations, Astra felt completely out of place. Did she just imagine it, or were they in fact staring at her, dressed as she was in her old airline hostess uniform stripped of its insignia, and now somewhat tight on her? Did they know that she really did not belong here, that her being here was some error or, even worse, a bad joke?

Her gaze caught the eye of a tall, slim young man, up the stairs. He raised his glass and smiled at Astra and began to make his way toward her through the crowd, his eyes fixed on her.

"Hello there," he said as he reached her. "I've watched you marooned on an arid island amidst a sea of people, not a drink in your hand, and have come to the rescue. . . . Are you alone here?"

"Alone and puzzled," Astra said. "Not only don't I have a drink, I don't even know how I got here."

“You don’t know how you got here?” he repeated jovially. “Knocked unconscious and carried in wrapped in a rolled-up magic carpet, that’s how!”

She laughed. “No, I mean I have no idea why I was invited or who invited me. Do you know?” She looked straight at him as she asked the question.

“Who cares?” he said, “as long as you’re here and I’m getting to know you. I am your knight to the rescue come, Henry by name. And what is thy name, my lady?”

“Astra.”

“How wonderful, how celestial. . . . Shall I get you a drink, my charming lady?” He bent toward her as he spoke, his face coming close to hers.

She jerked her head backward to avoid his mouth touching hers.

“Why, yes, Henry, I’d love to have a drink, right away, please.”

“Don’t move,” he told her. “I’ll be back in a whiff!”

He turned and began to push his way toward the stairs leading to the coffee shop. No sooner had he done so than Astra made her way through the crowd in the opposite direction.

The crowd of invitees was now backed up all the way through the Greek gallery and the gallery leading to it from the entrance. To relieve the pressure and the risk of damage to the statues, attendants were removing the rope barriers that blocked the way into the museum’s Assyrian section. There was a surge of people into the newly opened area, and Astra made her way there.

The entrance to this section was flanked by life-size stone statues of guardian deities, their divine status revealed by the horned headdresses they wore. They had been placed at the entrance to greet the modern visitors, just as they had greeted worshippers in ancient Assyria. Passing between them into the section of the museum where she had been many times before, Astra’s unease lessened. Most of the people who were surging in with her turned to the left, lured by the sight of the pair of gigantic sculptures of mythological creatures—bulls with the wings of an eagle and the humanlike head of a protective deity—that had once guarded the

throne of an Assyrian king. Astra veered to the right, toward a row of Assyrian stelas from the first millennium BCE—stone columns depicting the king protected by the celestial emblems of the great gods of Assyria. These five symbols were repeated on each stela, and a plaque on the section's wall offered the visitor an explanation.

Uttering the words to herself, Astra read out the explanation: "'The horned headdress represented Anu, the god of the Heavens. The Winged Disc was the celestial emblem of his son, the god Ashur, the head of the Assyrian pantheon. The crescent was the emblem of Sin, the moon god. The forked thunderbolt was the symbol of Adad. The eight-pointed star represented Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, whom the Romans called Venus.'"

Having read the explanation, Astra moved from stela to stela, studying the emblems on each. She stopped at the stela of the king Ashurbanipal, whose hand was raised toward the celestial emblems, his index finger pointing to the symbol of Ishtar. Ignoring the people around her, Astra put out her hand to touch the symbol, and her pulse quickened as her fingers caressed the ancient engraving. She focused her gaze on the king's mouth, touched the stone lips, and whispered, "Ancient lips, utter again your immortal message!"

She closed her eyes, and in spite of the din around her, could clearly hear the whispered words: "Look, Astra, look at your destiny star . . ."

Her hand flinched and she opened her eyes. She turned abruptly around. Henry was standing there right behind her, a drink for her in his hand. He was smiling.

"Have you just spoken to me?" she asked.

"The sweet words have not yet crossed my lips," he said. "I was going to say, though, why caress the frozen lips when there are living ones to press against yours?"

"Words were uttered to me," Astra said. "It may sound odd, but I've heard words coming from this monument once before."

"How very interesting," Henry said. "Do go on." He handed her the glass.

"These emblems somehow touch a chord in me," Astra continued as she turned to look at them again. "I come to look at them

whenever I can, after work. . . . They seem to be holding a secret, a hidden message."

"And the stone then whispers the message to you, is that it?"

"I'm not crazy, I did hear spoken words—now and once before," Astra replied, and raised her glass to toast the monument.

She turned back. Henry was now a few feet away from her, having been pushed away by the surging crowd.

"You must tell me about your cult," he shouted to her, raising his glass.

Astra ignored his words and let the crowd put more distance between them. Everybody seemed to now be in this part of the museum. A man who had stepped up to a small platform placed between the ancient winged bulls was trying to hush the crowd, and after several calls to order, he began the proceedings.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a firm voice, "my name is James Higgins, and I am the museum's curator of western Asia antiquities. It is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the trustees of the British Museum to this opening of the Special Gilgamesh Exhibit."

He paused for effect and then continued. "The Special Gilgamesh Exhibit is being held to celebrate a kind of centennial. Among the great archaeological discoveries in Mesopotamia in the nineteenth century was the vast library of inscribed clay tablets of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, in Nineveh. The tablets, mostly damaged or broken into fragments, were brought to the British Museum. Here, in the basement of this very building, it was the job of George Smith to sort out, match, and categorize the tens of thousands of pieces of inscribed clay that arrived in wooden boxes. One day his eye caught a fragment that seemed to relate a story of a great flood, and he realized that he had come upon a Mesopotamian version of the biblical story of the Deluge!

"With understandable excitement, the museum trustees sent George Smith to the archaeological site in Mesopotamia to search for additional fragments. Luck was on his side, for he found enough of them to be able to reconstruct the original text and publish it, in 1876, as *The Chaldean Account of the Flood*."

There were murmurs of concurrence from the crowd, and the curator continued, “But as Smith himself had concluded, and as additional finds have by now conclusively established, the tale that was discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal dealt only partly with the subject of the Deluge. It was a long tale, written on twelve tablets. Its original ancient title, drawn from its opening line, was *He Who Saw Everything*. We now refer to it as the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* for it tells the story of a king by that name who was restless and adventurous, challenging both men and gods. Claiming to be partly divine, he deemed himself entitled to immortality. It was in search of such an escape from the fate of all mortals that he had gone to the magical Landing Place of the Gods, and then to the secret domain called the Land of Living. There he found an ancestor from long ago who was still alive. The latter turned out to be the hero of the Deluge, the one called Noah in the Bible. It was he who then proceeded to tell Gilgamesh the tale of the unforgettable calamity of the Great Flood.

“It was thus a century ago that the biblical tales of Genesis were linked to the lore of ancient Assyria and Babylon. In that past century we have also come to know that all those writings stem from an earlier common source, the original written records of the Sumerians —that mysterious people who had created the first known civilization, in southern Mesopotamia.

“Not only have these ancient Assyrian and Babylonian tales confirmed that Gilgamesh was a historical figure, other epic tales, as well as actual lists of kings that have come down to us, confirm it also. Gilgamesh was the fifth ruler of the Sumerian city Uruk, the biblical Erech. He reigned nearly five thousand years ago. His father was a High Priest. His mother was a goddess named Ninsun, making Gilgamesh two-thirds divine. Until the archaeologist’s spade uncovered the city—its streets, houses, wharfs, and temples, including the shrines to Ninsun—Erech was just the name of an unknown, seemingly nebulous mythological place mentioned in the Bible. But if the Bible was correct about Erech and all the other cities mentioned in it, and if it was correct about the various Assyrian and Babylonian rulers it speaks of, could it be that the other tales—of a

deluge and of a Noah, of a Tower of Babel, and of a Garden of Eden —were also factual, a written record of the long ago?"

The curator paused. "I seem to be getting carried away," he said, gesturing apologetically. "So let me stop here. Whatever the implications of the discoveries of the past century and those more recent, there is no doubt that a turning point in our knowledge and understanding was reached with the publication of *The Chaldean Account of the Flood*. It is to commemorate the centenary of that event that the museum has put together this special exhibit. It brings together finds and artifacts now located in several museums in various countries, but the core are the tablets that George Smith pieced together and which have not been on exhibit for public viewing for quite a long time."

The curator signaled with his hand, and attendants removed the ropes that held the crowd back from the special section. "I invite you to inaugurate the Special Gilgamesh Exhibit," he announced in a raised, excited voice, hoping to be heard above the din of the crowd. But no one really awaited his final words, for no sooner had the ropes been removed than the crowd surged forward on its own.

Astra, who had stayed in the back when the curator began to speak, now had to wait her turn to go into the special exhibit area. There, in the center, protected by a Plexiglas cubicle, were the original fragments pieced together by George Smith. Under another Plexiglas hood, cylinder seals pertaining to the epic tale of Gilgamesh were displayed. These were small cylinders cut from semiprecious stones on which scenes from the tale were engraved in reverse, so that when the cylinder was rolled on wet clay the intended depiction was impressed. There were seals not only from Mesopotamia but from all over the ancient world, dating to the second and first millennia BCE. The most frequent scene shown on the seals was that of Gilgamesh wrestling the lions. Others depicted him in his royal garb, and there were also depictions of his comrade Enkidu, mostly showing him with the animals of the wild among which he had grown up.

He who saw everything,

who went to the Land;
Who all things experienced,
considered all . . .
Secret things he has seen,
what is hidden from Man he found out;
He even brought tidings
of the time before the Deluge.
He also took the distant journey
wearisome and under difficulties.
He returned, and upon a stone column
all his toil's tale he engraved.

Astra was still bending down to read the rest of the text when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around. It was Henry.

"Remember me?" he said, "the knight without armor? I am afraid I said something rash when last seen. I am sorry."

"Never mind," Astra replied. "I really came here for the exhibit."

"Gilgamesh is more interesting, then, though long dead, in spite of all his searches for immortality," Henry said. "Did you know that to keep himself young he roamed the streets of Erech at night, seeking out wedding celebrations? He then challenged the bridegroom to a wrestling match, which he always won. Then he claimed for himself as a prize the right to be the first to sleep with the virgin bride."

"He did?" Astra said. "And what if there had been more than one wedding that night?" She chuckled.

"It says here," Henry said, pointing to the text of the first tablet, "that Enkidu, a sort of artificial man created by the god Enki, made love to a harlot for six days and seven nights without taking time out. Gilgamesh, equally virile, survived an annual rite of a Sacred Marriage with the goddess Inanna during which he had to perform fifty times in one night. . . . Does this answer your question?"

Astra now took a closer look at Henry. He was younger than she was, maybe thirty. He had a freckled face and light brown hair and

was far from being good-looking. But his smile had an audacity about it, fresh and inviting . . .

“You seem to know a lot,” she said. “Are you a teacher or something?”

“Indeed I am. A lecturer on Assyriology. And you?”

“A has-been,” Astra replied with a shrug. “A damn good cabin attendant, now running the cabin crews’ briefing room, having become more mature and plump.”

“Curvy, I would rather say,” Henry said, tilting his head as though to get a look at her from another angle. “Not unlike Inanna, better known as Ishtar, as a matter of fact. She used to flaunt her naked beauty, so most depictions of her show her naked or wearing a see-through garment.”

He took Astra’s hand and drew her away from the display of tablets to the showcase with the seal cylinders. “Here,” he said, pointing at a group of seals, “you can see some of those depictions.”

“Why did she do that?”

“She was the goddess of love. I suppose she had to live up to her reputation. . . . The sixth tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* relates how, seeing him naked, Inanna invited him to make love to her. Will history repeat itself, Astra?” He looked into her eyes, his hold on her hand tightening.

“Did Gilgamesh accept the invitation?”

“Well . . . as the ancient tale goes, he did not. He turned her down, citing the instances when she had killed off her human lovers. But *I* would have taken the chance!”

“It’s an interesting offer: to reenact an encounter from millennia ago and see if it turns out differently,” Astra said, pulling her hand from his. “But I still want to find out how I happen to be here. Do you know?”

“*I* do,” a voice beside her said. Astra turned toward the speaker. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his fifties, his thick hair graying at the temples. His eyes were blue-gray, and he was staring at her so intensely that she could not move her gaze to see his other features.

“You? But why?” Astra blurted out.

“It’s rather private,” the stranger replied. He held out his hand. “Would you come with me, please?” He was still staring into her eyes.

“Just a minute,” Henry said. “This young lady is with me!”

“Nonsense,” the stranger said. “I’ve watched you trying to pick her up, even mocking her when she felt a bond with the ancient monuments. . . . So, please don’t mind my borrowing Miss Kouri for a while.”

Without giving either one of them a chance to object further, he took Astra by the arm and led her away through the jostling crowd.

They were outside the special exhibit area when Astra stopped short, pulling her arm away from his hold. “You know my name?” she said.

“Yes. You are Miss Astra Kouri, aren’t you?”

Astra could feel blood surge to her face. Her heart began to pound. “How?”

The stranger smiled. “I am pleased you could accept the invitation,” he told her.

“Who *are* you?”

“My friends call me Eli, but that is short for my family name, Helios. Adam Helios, that is my full name. . . . Now you have your answer, don’t you?”

Astra nodded.

“Come with me, then.” He took her by the arm again and led her toward the entrance to the Assyrian exhibit, stopping in front of the stela of Ashurbanipal.

“Look, Astra, look at your destiny star,” he whispered.

“You!” Astra cried out. ‘‘What do you want of me?”

Without shifting his gaze from hers, he took her hand and slid his fingers along its side to where Astra had a barely noticeable, lumpy scar. Then he took her free hand and slid her fingers along his hand’s side, until Astra could feel a similar lumpy scar on his hand.

“Oh my God!” she said.

“Yes, I too had a sixth finger that was surgically removed when I was a child,” he told her. “Isn’t that what was done to you, too?”

“It’s incredible,” Astra said. “Totally confusing. . . . How did you know that? How did you know my name?”

“Do you believe in destiny, Astra?” he whispered, putting his hands around her waist. “Do you believe that stars can beckon, that stones can speak?”

Astra resisted his grasp. “How much do you know about me, for heaven’s sake?”

He let go of her waist. “More than you yourself ever knew,” he said. “Come with me and I will tell you all.”

He was no longer looking at her, but at the celestial symbols on the monument.

“I really don’t think . . .” Astra began to say, but stopped as his hand reached out again, and he pressed his lumpy scar against hers.

“We are one of a kind,” he said. “Uniquely endowed with a sixth finger. . . . Can’t you hear our destiny calling?” His eyes were again gazing straight into hers, demanding and commanding. Astra wanted to say something, but couldn’t.

“Come,” he said, and took her by the arm. Astra went along.

“I live nearby,” Eli added as they reached the stairs leading out of the museum. They crossed the courtyard and then Great Russell Street, which led into Museum Street, a narrow street flanked by old buildings that once upon a time were homes of the rich but now housed publishers’ offices and bookstores specializing in Orientalia and the occult. They walked silently, Eli still holding Astra’s arm.

They turned into an even narrower street, then into an alley. Astra figured they were somewhere in the back of the buildings they had passed minutes earlier, but she couldn’t be sure. There were no street lights in the alley; in the darkness, Eli stopped in front of what turned out to be a door. Deftly he unlocked it, for the first time letting go of Astra’s arm. A dim bluish light went on inside as he opened the door, and a narrow stairway steeply leading up came into view.

“Please,” he said.

As soon as Astra was inside he locked the door behind them. “I’ll lead the way,” he continued, as he began to climb the stairs.

There were landings at half-floor levels, leading through unexpected doors to unseen rooms, all barely noticeable in the dim bluish light whose source Astra could not determine. After walking up what seemed to Astra to be about two full floors, Eli opened a door and led her into a medium-size room where the bluish light was brighter. Astra could see that the room was furnished as a sitting room, with most of its available wall space taken up by ceiling-high bookshelves. There was a smell in the room, a dazzling smell. From her flying days, Astra could recognize, in a whiff, the smells of marijuana, hashish, and the like, but what she now smelled was none of those.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Eli said, pointing to a large, soft armchair. Astra tucked her handbag by her side.

“Damn it,” she said, “I left my raincoat and hat in the museum!”

“No worries,” Eli said. “They’ll be safe there until you pick them up. . . . Sherry?”

Without waiting for an answer, he filled two glasses from a decanter that was on a small side table. He offered her a glass, and Astra raised her hand to take it, but he held on to the glass for a moment. “You *are* beautiful,” he said as he let go of it.

Although her senses were engulfed by the sweet and dazzling smell filling the room, Astra did not let the remark slip by.

“Is that your usual opening line?” she asked.

He raised his glass. “Let’s drink to an enchanting evening. I promised to tell you all, and I will. Let me begin with the invitation,” he said as he sat himself in an armchair opposite hers. “To explain this will be the simplest thing I will be doing this evening. You see, I work in the museum. My job is to sort out and restore Near Eastern antiquities. I noticed you in the museum more than a year ago, and then saw you on your subsequent visits. I noticed you, you see, because you’ve reminded me of someone.” He paused to sip his sherry.

“Of whom?” Astra asked.

“You’ll meet her shortly,” he replied. “After a while I realized that you came to the museum on certain days, at certain hours, and I made it a point of awaiting you. More often than not, I was not disappointed. I watched you as you stood again and again by certain artifacts. As you have done this evening—yes, I watched you—you would touch some of the stelas and wall reliefs, the celestial symbols sculpted on them. You would pass your fingers over them, over one in particular. . . . I watched you, I watched your hand. . . . Unnoticed by you, I stood near you a few times. . . . Then, one day, as you raised your hand to touch the celestial symbols, I saw it!”

“What was it that you saw?”

“The scar, the telltale scar—the scar where your sixth finger had been before it was removed!” he answered, excitement in his voice, “and I knew then that finding you was the omen I had been waiting for. . . .” He paused and sipped his sherry to becalm himself. “The rest was easy. I followed you, I found out where you live and work, I found out your name. Then, when the museum prepared the Gilgamesh exhibit, and I saw the date that had been chosen for its opening, I knew that it was preordained. . . . I knew that the time had come to take the next fateful step. So I pinched an invitation and addressed it to you.”

“All on account of my sixth finger?” Astra asked, taking a sip of the sherry. “Or was the rest of my body involved?”

“Just like her,” Eli said. “Sharp-tongued, quick-tempered. . . . How well do you know the Bible, Astra?”

“We had no Sunday school where I grew up,” she said. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“I will let the Bible explain,” he replied. He got up and went to one of the bookshelves, picked out a volume, and went back to his armchair. Switching on a lamp that stood on a side table near him, he leafed through the book until he found what he was looking for. “Are you familiar with the biblical tale of the spies sent by Moses to Canaan ahead of the Israelite tribes?” he asked.

“Not really,” Astra replied.

“It’s told in the Book of Numbers, chapter 13. They went from the wilderness of Sinai through the Negev and reached the city of

Hebron, which was the renowned abode of so-called giants, the three descendants of Anak: Achiman, Sheshai, and Talmai. . . .” He paused and leafed through the Bible again. “These three descendants of Anak are mentioned again: once more in the Book of Joshua and then again in the first Book of Judges, reporting the conquest of Hebron by the tribe of Judah. Each time the three are listed by their names—Achiman, Talmai, and Sheshai. . . . Do you know what the name *Sheshai* means?”

“No idea.”

“He of the six!”

“Six fingers?” Astra ventured a guess.

“You can bet your life on it,” Eli answered. “That whole part of southern Canaan bordering the Sinai Peninsula was known in antiquity for being the abode of descendants of superhuman beings, one of whose unique features was a sixth finger. Five hundred years later, King David, fighting the Philistines in that very same area, encountered the descendants of those superhuman beings. There were four of them in the city of Gath. Here, let me read to you from the second Book of Samuel: ‘And there was yet another battle at Gath, and there appeared yet another giant; and he had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in all, for he too was a descendant of the Rephaim.’”

“Are you suggesting that we have something in common with the giants of the biblical tales?”

“Of course,” Eli said. “The phenomenon is known to modern medicine as *polydactyly,* where a small extra digit grows on the side of the hand or the foot. The growth is without question an uncommon genetic trait, passed from generation to generation. Like all such uncommon traits, the erratic gene must be carried by both father and mother for the peculiarity to reappear in their offspring. . . . Sometimes, therefore, the gene may remain unseen, unexpressed, for generations—then reasserts itself when the matching mating occurs. The trait then appears in the offspring—in our case, a sixth finger or toe.”

“I’ve read about such genetic defects peculiar to certain groups of people,” Astra said. “It’s a matter of heredity, they claim.”

“Precisely,” Eli said. “Except that our particular trait is not a defect, not at all . . .”

He did not finish the sentence. Instead he got up and refilled their sherry glasses. He handed Astra hers and remained standing. The lamp light formed an illuminated background behind him, a glow enhancing his silhouette in the room’s bluish hue. Astra was silent, awaiting his words.

“We—you and I,” he said looking into her eyes, “have a common gene; we are descended from the same ancestors . . . people from days of yore who were already ‘of old’ in biblical times . . .”

“But you just were saying that this is not a defect,” Astra interjected.

“On the contrary,” said Eli. “It means we are eligible for immortality!”

“*Immortality?* You must be joking.”

“Not at all,” Eli said. “I’m dead serious.”

“Just because we were born with a sixth finger?”

“Because we are descended of the Rephaim, among other things. . . . Do you know what this biblical word means?”

“No.”

“It literally means ‘the Healers.’ They are mentioned in the Bible several times as the extraordinary residents of certain parts of the Holy Land in remote times. According to the lore of other ancient peoples, the Rephaim were divine beings who knew the secrets of healing . . .”

“Like the archangel Raphael?”

“That’s right, that’s precisely what the name means. ‘God’s Healer,’ or more literally translated, ‘the Healer of the deity called El’. . . . According to an ancient Canaanite tale, a king named Keret was a demigod, the son of El. Having angered a certain goddess, she afflicted him with a fatal disease. But as he was dying, El sent the goddess of healing to the rescue, and she restored Keret to life.”

He took a sip of the sherry. “And then there is the Canaanite tale of Dan-El, clearly identified as a descendant of the Rephaim. Like the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, he had no male heir by his wife. Like

Abraham, residing in the Negev area of Canaan, he had divine visitors who promised him a son by his wife in spite of the couple's old age. To make that possible, they gave Dan-El a potion called Life Breath, which rejuvenated and invigorated him."

"Did it work?" Astra asked.

"Oh, yes. A son was indeed born. When he grew up to be a young man, the goddess Anat—the Canaanite name for the goddess of war and love—desired him. Knowing the consequences of making love to a goddess except in certain circumstances, he refused. So, to entice him, Anat promised to obtain immortality for him."

"Immortality through rejuvenation. Eternal youth. Was that it?"

"Yes," Eli replied. "The divine trait of the Rephaim, passed along genetically to their descendants, revealed by the sign of the sixth finger!"

"Tell me more," Astra said. "All there is to know."

He came closer to her and with his hand lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "It's a long journey back," he said, "back to our origins."

"Take me back," she murmured. "I must know it all."

She wanted to close her eyes but his gaze was too penetrating to do so. Still holding her chin, he began to bend down over her, and Astra knew that he was going to kiss her. A shiver, like a lightning bolt, passed through her body. But he only kissed her lightly on the forehead, then let her go.

"Very well," he said. "Let us begin our journey to the past."

2

Eli went back to his seat by the table lamp. In the bluish light that engulfed the room, and to which Astra's eyes had now become accustomed, the bright light of the table lamp bathed Eli in an eerie glow, casting his large shadow upon the opposite wall.

"The events concerning us happened long ago," Eli began, speaking slowly, "and their roots are shrouded in the dimmest past. . . ." He picked up the Bible, holding it up. "The beginnings are recorded here, but only enough for a glimpse. The Bible is the entry point, the corridor is the tales of the misty past that are called mythology. And the treasure room is the Sumerian tales of prehistory that are, in fact, the Earth Chronicles."

"Like the tale of Gilgamesh?" Astra interjected.

"From times much, much earlier than his, but the tale of Gilgamesh is more appropriate than you realize. First we have Gilgamesh himself. He claimed the right to immortality because he was two-thirds divine. His mother, Ninsun, was a goddess, and his father was descended from the god called Shamash. Then there was the hero of the Deluge, the one called Noah in the Bible and Ziusudra in the Sumerian texts. Gilgamesh went to find him because the gods had granted to Ziusudra an Everlife. The Bible described Noah as having been of pure lineage. The Sumerian chronicles are more specific; they tell us that Ziusudra's father was the son of a god, the same Shamash."

"Lineage traced back to the gods, a divine gene—is that the secret of an Everlife?" Astra asked.

"Lineage, heredity, divine origins, a certain gene . . . call it what you want."

"Which some mortals have because they are descended from offspring of gods?" Astra shifted uneasily in the armchair as she

spoke. “And what is there to support the Sumerian contention that the so-called gods intermarried with humans?”

“The Bible!” said Eli, waving the volume. “I believe every word of it, literally. . . . Here, in Genesis 6, when the situation on Earth prior to the Deluge is described, this is what it says:

> *‘And it came to pass,*
> *When the Earthlings began to increase in number upon the face of the Earth and daughters were born unto them,*
> *That the sons of the gods saw the daughters of Man, that they were compatible, and they took unto themselves wives as they chose. . . .*
> *The* Nefilim *were upon the Earth in those days and thereafter too,*
> *When the sons of the gods cohabited with the daughters of Earthlings, and had children by them.*
> *They were the mighty ones of Eternity, the People of the* Shem.’”

He put the Bible down. “There you have it,” he said. “In the verse that is usually translated ‘the *giants* were upon the Earth in those days,’ I read the original Hebrew term, *Nefilim*. It means ‘Those Who Had Come Down, From the Heavens to Earth.’ They were the sons of the gods and married human females. Their offspring were mighty ones, people of eternity—privileged to an Everlife!”

His right arm jerked awkwardly and he grasped it with his left hand.

“Is something wrong?” Astra asked.

“No, no,” he said. “I was just moved by uncontrollable emotions as I read the sacred words that link us to our past, to our roots.”

“Listen,” Astra said, “perhaps we should continue another time. It’s getting late, and I have to be at my job tomorrow. I think I’d better leave.” She got up.

“‘No!” Eli said, quite emphatically. “You must stay! We must continue, tonight!”

“What’s so special about tonight? The Gilgamesh exhibit?”

“The timing of it,” Eli said. His arm began to jerk again and he grabbed it again. “It’s preordained, I tell you. . . . Please, you must stay!”

There was mystery in his voice, and impatience too. Astra hesitated.

“Please sit down,” he said, the jerking of his arm and the tone of his voice becalmed. “Let me show you some slides.”

She sat down and Eli went to the wall opposite her seat and pulled down a small white screen. He shut off the table lamp, returning the room to its bluish dimness, then went to a corner of the room behind Astra. There he switched on a slide projector. For a moment there was a blinding light in the room as the projector’s beam went on, without a slide to show. But in the next moment a slide was flashed on the screen—a photograph of ancient ruins showing six remaining tall columns.

“Baalbek!” Astra let out a cry.

“Yes, Baalbek in the mountains of Lebanon, in the Cedar Forest. Isn’t it where you come from?”

“Yes! I was born in the town near the ancient ruins. My family has always lived there . . .”

Eli flashed another slide on the screen.

“This is an aerial photograph of the site. The ruins now seen are of Roman temples, grander than any built in Rome itself. The temples were built upon the ruins of earlier Greek temples, for Alexander the Great to worship in. And before that, Phoenician temples stood there. King Solomon aggrandized the place in honor of his guest, the Queen of Sheba; there had been temples there even before there were kings in Jerusalem. But as temples replaced temples, one thing remained unchanged: the vast platform on which all these temples were built. Five million square feet of a platform made of immense stones, and in one of its corners, a massive podium, the likes of which there is none in the world!”

“We were not allowed to go to the ruins,” Astra said softly. “My parents and grandparents said they were sacred. Our Maronite priest said it was the abode of the Fallen Angels. I heard legends that the place was built before the Deluge, by giants.”

“So you’ve never been to the ruins, never stood upon the vast platform?”

“Once, only once. It was before I left Lebanon to come to England. There was something inside me that pulled me to them, like an umbilical cord. . . . So I went there, in spite of the admonitions. I went up the mountain and walked upon the platform, then climbed atop the podium. I stood there for a long time. I could see as far as the horizons to the north, the west, the south. The wind was blowing my hair, and it felt as though the wind would carry me aloft and I would fly away, I knew not where. . . . And then I knew, just knew, that I would be safe on all my flights as an airline hostess.”

“Did you see the Trilithon?” Eli asked as he flashed on the screen a new slide showing three immense stone blocks forming one of the layers at the base of the podium. “They weigh over a thousand tons each!”

“Those three colossal stone blocks? Yes, I have seen them before, many times, and several others of immense size,” Astra said. “We children used to sneak up the mountainside and view the gigantic stones from a distance. . . . But we did go and climb upon the companion stone block that still lies in the ancient quarry, in the valley.”

“Ah, yes,” Eli said. “It’s in my next slide.” He flashed on a photograph of a colossal stone block lying on its side, partly buried in the ground. A man sitting on it appeared as a fly resting on an elongated block of ice.

“Did anyone figure out how these gigantic stone blocks were carried all the way from the quarry in the valley, up the mountain?” Astra asked.

“No,” Eli said. “Even nowadays there’s no piece of equipment that can lift a thousand tons, or even the five hundred tons that most of the podium’s stones weigh. Yet in antiquity someone, somehow, did the impossible.”

“The giants of Christian legends?”

“And of Jewish legends, and of Greek legends . . . the giants that, in the Bible, are literally called ‘Those Who Had Come Down.’ The

Sumerians called them *Anunnaki*. It meant the same thing: 'Those Who From Heaven to Earth Came.'"

"Didn't Gilgamesh attempt to enter a secret tunnel of the Anunnaki?" Astra asked. "Who were they, actually?"

"The gods," Eli said. "The gods of the Sumerians and of all the ancient peoples. They had come to Earth, the Sumerians reported, when our species was still apelike. The leader of the first landing party was called Enki, meaning 'Lord of Earth.' He was a brilliant scientist. He was followed to Earth by his half-brother Enlil. The name meant 'lord of the command,' for he was indeed put in charge of the Earth Mission of the Anunnaki. Then they were joined by a half-sister, Ninharsag, as chief medical officer. Born to different mothers, they had the same father—the ruler on their home planet, which was called Nibiru."

"These are only legends," Astra said. "Mythology . . . like the Greek tales of Zeus and the celestial wars between the gods and the Titans."

"No, facts!" Eli quickly asserted. The Bible repeatedly states that the Nefilim were also known as *Anakim,* which is simply the Hebrew for Anunnaki. It also states that a specific group of Anakim was called *Zuzim,* namely descendants of Zu. Have you ever read the Sumerian tale of Zu?"

"No," Astra said.

"Zu's full name was Anzu, meaning 'He Who Knows the Heavens'—an astronomer, a space scientist. He was sent to Earth when the Anunnaki had already established themselves, six hundred on Earth and three hundred upon orbiting platforms and shuttlecraft. On Enki's recommendation, Zu was assigned to the headquarters of Enlil's mission control center. There, in an innermost chamber engulfed in a heavenly glow and a constant hum, Enlil kept the Tablets of Destinies. Akin to our computer memory discs but undoubtedly much more sophisticated, the tablets were essential to what was termed *Dur-an-ki,* or 'Link Heaven-Earth,' for it kept track of all celestial movements and guided the spacecraft between Nibiru and Earth. Then one day, seeking to seize control, Zu stole the Tablets of Destinies and flew away with them to a hiding place. Their

removal brought everything to a standstill. . . . In the end, the tablets were retrieved after aerial battles between Zu and Enlil's foremost son, Ninurta. Zu was brought down with a missile over the Sinai Peninsula."

"Quite a tale," Astra said. "Space stations, a glowing and humming secret chamber, a mad scientist, aerial battles . . . science fiction from six thousand years ago!"

"Amazing even if it *were* science fiction from that long ago," Eli said. "But all these things did happen!"

"This is too incredible," Astra persisted. "In primitive times, Tablets of Destinies that are space-age memory discs . . ."

"Well now!" Eli said. "What do you say to *this*?"

He changed the slides, projecting on the screen the photograph of a circular object, a disc on which there were inscribed various geometrical forms—lines, arrows, triangles, and other shapes accompanied by cuneiform symbols.

"What is it?" Astra asked.

"A Tablet of Destinies—rather a replica thereof. The very object whose existence you've doubted. An encoded disc, a celestial route map. The key to immortality. Do you recall it, Astra?"

"Recall? Why should I recall such an object?"

Eli came around and stood before her, staring at her. "You must recall the tablet," he said. "It is most important."

Astra shrugged.

"Enlil, Enki, Ninharsag, . . . nothing rings a bell within you?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Astra replied.

Without speaking, Eli went to one of the walls lined with bookshelves. Touching an unseen button, he made a panel move sideways. From the hollow he took out a jug, and walking over to the small table where the sherry bottle and glasses were, carefully poured a golden liquid from the jug into two small glasses. He walked over to Astra, handing her one of the glasses.

"It's a nectar," he said, "pressed from certain herbs and flowers, a very old recipe in my family, believed to trace back to Assyrian

temple rites. . . . Sip from it . . . sip and sit back . . . relax . . . let your thoughts float freely."

She took the glass and looked at him. Unexpectedly, he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. His lips were warm, unusually warm, and their touch sent a warm sensation into her brain.

"Is this some kind of love potion?" she asked.

He smiled. "My dear Astra," he said softly, "we have been in love a long time. . . . The nectar will help you remember."

He took a sip from the nectar. She stared at him with a puzzled look. "It's time you told me who you are," she said.

"Sip the nectar, and I will," he told her.

She took a sip of the nectar. It tasted like a mixture of honey and pomegranates and smelled of jasmine. It had a pleasant, smooth taste, but no sooner had she swallowed it than she could feel a warmth rise within her, like an inner glow. She smiled at Eli.

"It tastes good," she said. "Do go on."

"I am an Assyrian," he said. "Not a Syrian from the present-day country adjoining Lebanon, but a descendent of the Assyrians of northern Mesopotamia, of the mighty kings whose stelas you have been admiring and caressing in the museum. . . . The Assyrians proclaimed themselves, with the blessing of their gods, rulers of the Four Regions. In order to legitimize that imperial status, they had to extend their rule to ancient Sumer and to intermarry with the descendants of the kings of Sumer, especially those who, by their lineage, were descended from offspring of the demigods. . . . They married their daughters to descendants of the kings of Erech and Ur, whose divine lineage was ascertained not just from family records but by the one unique and telltale sign, the sixth finger."

He raised his hand to show his telltale scar again. "In spite of the passage of millennia, the rise and fall of empires, wars and killings and dispersions, a core of descendants of the ancient Assyrians has remained with unbroken family and genetic links. They were always clustered around the family that carried the divine gene, revealed by the birth of a baby with a sixth finger."

“Does it mean that we were related somewhere in the distant past?”

“Yes,” Eli said. “You and I. . . . Our destinies were intertwined in the past. Fate has brought us together again!”

He sipped of the nectar and Astra did too. The inner warmth engulfed her again, and perspiration beads appeared on her forehead, although the room was not heated.

“I feel warm,” she said, and getting up, took off her jacket. Her motions pressed her blouse against her full, well-rounded breasts, and Astra caught the sudden blaze in Eli’s gaze. His right arm jerked and he almost spilled his nectar, and Astra felt a sudden impulse to touch him.

She came to him and took hold of his twitching arm and caressed it gently until the spasm passed. Neither said a word. She put her scar against his and stared into his eyes.

“Will you tell me who I *really* am?” she asked softly.

He drew her closer to him and her body tightened against his. She closed her eyes. Her lips parted. He kissed her softly on the forehead.

“You must remember more,” he whispered, “only then . . .” Without finishing the sentence, he led her gently back to her armchair.

“I promised to let you know more about yourself than you had ever imagined,” he said, “but we must do it gradually . . . we must arrive there together.”

“Arrive where?” Astra asked.

He took his glass. “Let’s drink up the nectar,” he said. “To Everlife!”

She took her glass. “To Everlife!” she repeated, and drank up.

He went back to the slide projector and flashed the celestial symbol of the Winged Disc onto the screen.

“Our story,” he said, “begins in the distant Heavens. Eons ago, when our solar system was still young, there appeared a large celestial globe from outer space, a refugee from another star system that had exploded. As a result of the havoc and collisions that it caused, our own planet, Earth, and the asteroid belt and the comets, came into being. The invader itself was caught into orbit around our

Sun, becoming a twelfth member of our solar system. Its vast orbit takes it far out into space, then brings it back to our vicinity once every 3,600 years."

"Nibiru?"

"Yes, the planet of the Anunnaki. Once every 3,600 years they could come and go between their planet and Earth. Some 450,000 years ago they landed here in search of gold. On their own planet the atmosphere was eroding. Their scientists discovered that by suspending gold particles in their stratosphere, they could preserve life, and themselves, on their majestic planet."

Astra stirred in her seat. "Enki . . . Enlil . . ." she whispered.

"Yes, they were the leaders who had come from Nibiru," Eli said. "Do the names ring a bell?"

"I'm not sure," Astra said. "Something stirs within me . . ."

He went to the small table and refilled their glasses with the nectar. "Here, sip some more," he said as he gave Astra her glass, taking a sip from his own.

"Don't stop . . . tell me more," Astra said and took a sip. "I feel like I am being lifted up—floating . . ."

He bent over her and kissed her again on the forehead. "Relax . . . relax . . . remember!" he murmured.

He kept silent for a few moments, but when Astra remained silent, resumed his tale. "The orbit of Nibiru is a vital aspect of our odyssey, Astra. One orbit of Nibiru around its sun is but a year for those who live there. That same year on Nibiru equates to 3,600 Earth years. . . . Yet nothing is immortal in the universe, Astra—even the stars themselves are born and die. That holds true for the Anunnaki, the gods of antiquity. To the humans who worshipped them, the Anunnaki—with their long lifecycles stemming from Nibiru's extended orbit—seemed to be immortal. No matter how many human generations passed, the Anunnaki were ever present, hardly aging. But they did age, Astra, and they did eventually die."

"How sad," Astra said, "that gods should die."

"If an Earthling, a mortal man, could attain just one single year of the Anunnaki, he would indeed live forever in human terms—3,600

years. Ten years of the Anunnaki would mean 36,000 years of life on Earth. . . . Imagine that!”

“That’s what Gilgamesh was after,” Astra said.

“Yes,” Eli answered. “Keep sipping the nectar.”

They both took sips, and Eli flashed a picture on the screen of a female wearing a helmet like a pilot’s, her breasts and belly bare.

Astra’s hand holding the glass shook. “Ishtar,” she said. “The beautiful, enchanting Ishtar. . . . She roamed the skies in her celestial sphere.”

“Can you recall?” Eli asked, but Astra remained silent.

“Her name in Sumerian was Irnina, meaning ‘She Who Gives Joy.’ Her twin brother was Shamash, known in Sumerian times as Utu, ‘The Bright One.’ They were the grandchildren of the great Enlil. Their father, Nannar, was the first Anunnakian born on Earth. When the twins were born, there was great joy, but then the awful truth became apparent. For a while those who had come from Nibiru continued to enjoy Nibiru’s life cycle, Nannar—who was born on Earth—matured faster, and his own children grew older at an even faster rate. It was clear that Earth’s orbital period and life cycle was counteracting their genetic heritage of Nibiru’s life cycle.”

“Utu liked to fly,” Astra said suddenly. “He became chief of the Eagles.”

Eli came around to look at her. Her eyes were closed and she was grinning.

He bent down and kissed her gently on the forehead. “Float back, back in time,” he told her. “Remember more!”

She opened her eyes. “Go on, don’t stop,” she said. “It’s a fascinating story.”

Eli went back to the slide projector and flashed on the screen a wall relief depicting a young god equipped with two pairs of wings and two pairs of horns on his helmet. He was shown wearing a circular object on his right wrist, the way one wears a watch nowadays, and holding a rolled-up measuring cord in his left hand.

“The Anunnaki who manned the space facilities were indeed nicknamed ‘the Eagles,’ for their dress uniform was outfitted with

wings. In time, Utu became their commander."

"Abgal," Astra said. She shuddered and spoke more words, but they were unintelligible.

"Who was Abgal?" Eli asked. "You remember him."

"Abgal piloted the Boats of Heaven. Everyone knows that," Astra said, and giggled.

"Ah, yes," Eli concurred. "A spacecraft pilot. Utu was his commander, wasn't he?"

"He taught me flying . . . and other things too," Astra said, and chuckled.

"There was a spaceport in the Sinai Peninsula, the restricted region. . . . It was called Tilmun then, the Place of the Rocketships. . . . Tell me about it, Astra."

She wiggled in her chair. "The Landing Place was in the Cedar Mountain," she said slowly.

Eli looked for a particular slide and, having found it, flashed it on the screen. It showed a spherical object with three extended legs. A bulbous protrusion was hanging down from its bottom, and its midriff was lined with eyelike apertures.

"A wall painting from an archaeological site on the eastern bank of the river Jordan, some seven thousand years old," he said. "A celestial sphere, a skyship. To roam Earth's skies. To go to the Landing Place."

He paused, but Astra was silent. "Gilgamesh," Eli continued. "He went to the Landing Place. Ishtar saw him there. . . . There was a tablet . . ."

"Abgal piloted a Gir," Astra said emphatically.

"But of course," Eli replied. He changed slides, showing on the screen drawings of a rocketship with flames billowing from its tail. In one instance it was depicted with a pointed upper part attached to the rocketship's main body. In the other, the upper module was shown separated and moving away from the rocketship.

"Here is the Gir," he said. "It served as a shuttlecraft, landing on Earth and taking off to rejoin the orbiting spaceship. . . . Abgal took you up in a Gir, did he?"

“Nibiru glowed like a radiant star,” Astra said.

“The tablet,” Eli prompted. “Do you recall the tablet?”

Astra groaned. Eli went around to look at her. Her eyes were open but there was a blank look in them. He kissed her on the forehead.

“The Tablet of Destinies, Astra,” he said to her softly. “I will show it to you segment by segment. You *will* remember! You *must* remember! Our lives depend on it!”

He went back to the slide projector and flashed on the screen the photograph of the disclike object he had shown her before.

“The Tablet of Destinies,” he said. “You must remember!”

She shifted uneasily in her seat. “It’s different,” she finally said. “It does not look the same.”

“Great gods!” Eli cried out. “You *are* remembering!” He changed the slides, flashing on the screen a line drawing of the object, clarifying the geometrical shapes and the cuneiform writing.

“The directions,” Eli said. “Do you recognize the directions?”

“It is not the Writing of Heaven,” Astra said. “It’s profane.”

“But of course,” Eli told her. “How right you are. . . . The object I’ve been showing you is made of clay, a replica found by archaeologists and now kept in the British Museum. The writing was converted by the replicator into cuneiform in ancient Erech. . . . It is not the Writing of Heaven, but it has made it possible to read the instructions. . . . Here, let me show you more.”

He flashed on the screen an enlargement of a segment of the tablet on which there were drawn two triangles connected by an angled line, along which there were seven dots. At the edge of the second triangle were four more dots.

“The god Enlil went by the planets,” Eli said. “That’s what the inscription says below the seven dots arranged along the line. . . . ‘Seven planets on the route from Nibiru to Earth.’ Pluto was encountered first, then the pair Neptune and Uranus, then the giant Saturn and Jupiter. Coming from Nibiru, Mars was the sixth. And the seventh was Earth. Beyond there lay the Moon and Venus and Mercury, and finally the Sun . . . in a solar system of which Nibiru was the twelfth member.”

There was no reaction from Astra.

“The writing along the bottom edge of the segment,” Eli continued, “says in Sumerian ‘Rocket, Rocket, Pile-Up, Mountain, Mountain’ and along the inclined edge ‘High, High, High, High, Vapor-Cloud, No Vapor-Cloud’ . . . . Along the curving circumference the instruction ‘Set’ is repeated six times and the names of celestial bodies are given, but the tablet was damaged there, making this part illegible. . . . What were these instructions, Astra? Can you remember?”

“Enlil came from Nibiru,” Astra said dreamily. “It was the domain of Anu.”

“Yes! Yes!” Eli said. There was agitation in his voice. “We know all that. Concentrate on the tablet. You must remember!” His arm twitched and he grabbed it with his other hand to steady it. He began to perspire. He flashed an enlargement of another segment of the tablet on the screen.

“Concentrate on this, Astra,” he told her. “This is an enlargement of the second of the tablet’s eight segments. It’s badly eroded, but the words ‘Take,’ ‘Cast,’ ‘Complete’ are legible.”

Astra remained silent. He changed slides. “This segment, with the odd shapes and arrowed line, has the legend ‘Planet Jupiter That Provides Guidance.’ The names of two constellations are also inscribed, ‘Gemini and Taurus.’ Surely you can recall what that means, Astra!”

She mumbled unintelligibly. Eli flashed another slide on the screen.

“After a course fix at Jupiter and a turning at Mars, the spacemen from Nibiru reached the landing corridor on Earth. The words ‘Our Light’ and ‘Change’ are repeated along the descending line. There’s an instruction stating ‘Observe Path and High Ground.’ The horizontal line has the words ‘Rocket, Rocket, Rocket, Rise, Glide’ written along it, followed by a series of numbers. Where the two lines meet, the words ‘Flat Ground’ are written. The geometrical forms in this section, at its level portion, depict three triangular peaks, two high and one lower . . .”

“The pyramids!” Astra cried out. “The great mountains. The handiwork of Enki.”

“Go on,” Eli said when she stopped. She uttered a few more words that were unintelligible, twisted her body, and flailed her hands and fell silent.

“Yes,” Eli said, “the pyramids were built by the Anunnaki to serve as landing beacons, pointing the way to the spaceport in the Sinai.” He changed slides. “Although badly eroded, this segment is quite informative. The descending line has the legend ‘Central Plain’ and the number one hundred is repeated six times. The interconnecting lines state ‘Run Way,’ ‘Swift Onset,’ and ‘Finish.’ ‘The Gir had landed!’”

“Enlil returned to visit his father,” Astra said abruptly.

“Yes,” Eli said. “The last segment of the Tablet of Destinies indeed gave important instructions for the return to Nibiru. That is what the evening is all about, Astra . . .”

He flashed on the screen a segment showing crossed lines, a central arrowed line, and some inscribed words. “Here, at the edge, at the arrow pointing skyward,” he said, “the Sumerian word meaning ‘Return’ is clearly legible. . . . There’s a way back, Astra, and we can take it!”

“You showed only seven segments,” Astra pointed out.

“Well, yes,” Eli said hesitatingly. “I’ve skipped the third segment. It’s badly eroded.”

“You promised to tell me all—everything!” Astra said, visibly upset.

“Yes, yes,” Eli said. He searched for a slide, and finding it, pulled out the previous one. The bright beam momentarily lit up the room as he inserted the new slide.

“The lightning has struck!” Astra shouted, jumping up from her seat.

He rushed over to her and put his arm around her shoulder. She looked at him with wide-open eyes.

“The lightning has struck!” she said again and shuddered. “It’s an omen!”

Eli kissed her on the forehead and pulled her body toward his. Her shuddering stopped.

“Yes,” he said softly, caressing her. “It was an omen, from Anu, from Nibiru. . . . Look at the screen.”

The segment whose enlargement was projected appeared to have been badly damaged in its upper half. A geometrical form that remained partially discernible suggested that it was a drawing of an ellipse with several small triangles within it. The writing on the top half and on the curved margin was illegible, but the words written along the horizontal line were intact.

“Tell me . . . read the words of the omen,” Astra whispered.

“These are divine words,” Eli said. “What is left on the undamaged portion reads thus, ‘Emissary of Divine Anu . . . to Divine Ishtar, the Divine Beloved of Anu.’” He let go of the embrace, and Astra stepped back.

“Great gods!” she exclaimed, “an invitation from Anu! An invitation to return to Nibiru, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Eli said. “That’s what it was. . . . That’s what it still is.”

“Still is?”

“If we could find the original Tablet of Destinies that was sent from Heaven!”

“We?”

“Yes, you and I. . . . It can be done, but I cannot go alone. We must go back together!”

Astra took another step back. “Who are you?” she asked. There was a harshness in her voice.

“You’d better sit down,” he said. “We must sip more of the nectar before I answer.”

She sat down in her armchair. He refilled the glasses with the nectar and took a sip of his. Astra, reluctant at first, followed suit. He went back to the slide projector and again flashed on the screen the photograph of the disclike tablet.

“This is a replica,” he told her, “made in ancient times. The original Writing of Heaven was replaced with cuneiform symbols to enable its reading by others . . . those who were not gods. . . . The original tablet was a disc encoded with instructions for a space journey to Nibiru. *I* was the one who found it.”

“You?”

“It descended from the skies of Erech on a star-filled night, the last night of the New Year festival. . . . It was inside a space capsule. . . . I found it, I took it. . . . I hid it from you . . .”

He spoke dreamily and his words tapered off . . .

“Go on!” Astra insisted.

“My family, through the millennia, has retained the name Elios. It is but a mispronunciation of Helios, the Greek name for the sun god Shamash. . . . It has been a secret tradition in my family, passed from father to son, that we are descended from Shamash . . .”

He shut off the slide projector and came around to stand before her.

“The Sumerian king lists clearly state that Gilgamesh was descended from Shamash, through his father. . . . Ishtar and Shamash were twins; they both had the divine gene of the sixth finger. So did Gilgamesh . . .”

He bent and kissed her on her lips. “Oh, my beloved,” he whispered. “Don’t you remember me? *I was Gilgamesh!*”

She looked at him in puzzlement. He stared straight into her eyes.

“And who am I—who was I?” she asked softly.

“Close your eyes. . . . Float back, and you shall know!”

She closed her eyes. There was silence for a while. Then she felt Eli’s lips on her forehead. He was turning her armchair around.

“You can look now,” he told her.

3

When Astra opened her eyes, and even before she could recall where she was or why she was there, she saw at once the other woman.

She was standing inside an opening in the wall—perhaps a doorway, perhaps not—bathed in the glow of a yellow-golden light that made her stand out against the dark background behind her. At first Astra thought the woman was naked, but then Astra saw she was wearing a kind of see-through, clinging dress that accentuated her breasts. Her neck and chest were covered with a multi-rowed necklace, the stones of which were smaller on the top strands and larger on the bottom ones. The woman wore two odd shoulder pads, which, together with the necklace that was tight against her chin, seemed to force her head into a stiff, upright position.

Some of the woman's braided hair could be seen protruding from under a most unusual helmet that she wore. It looked like an old-fashioned aviator's leather padded helmet. It was held tight against the woman's head by two horns, which began as bulbous protrusions over her ears and then curved up, meeting in the center of the helmet, above her forehead.

The woman stood still. Her delicate face had slightly raised cheekbones and a wide, prominent chin. Her lips were pursed in a quasi-smile. Astra could not make out her nose, but she could see dark, deep eyes. In her hands the woman held a heavy, thick-walled vase, partly tilted toward Astra, as though it was a gesture of offering.

"Who are you?" Astra cried out.

The woman did not answer, remaining motionless.

"Who are you?!" Astra shouted, fright and anger in her voice. But again the other woman stood still, the quasi-smile frozen on her face.

“Don’t you recognize her?” a voice said, and in an instant Astra recalled Eli. He switched on the light of the table lamp and Astra could see him now, sitting where he had sat at the beginning of the evening.

“Who is she? What does this other woman do here?”

“Don’t you recognize her?” Eli repeated.

Astra turned to look again at the intruder. The woman was still standing there, a faint smile on her lips, her dark eyes looking straight at Astra. Astra’s eyes surveyed the full lips, the prominent cheekbones, the squarish chin. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

“My God,” she said. “It’s *me*!”

She shuddered again and slumped in the armchair.

Eli jumped from his seat and rushed to Astra’s side. He grabbed her cold hands in his, rubbing them for warmth. He slapped her cheeks gently.

“It’s all right,” he said, “it’s all right. It’s only a statue.”

Astra opened her eyes. “A statue?”

He helped her up and led her toward the lighted opening. It was, Astra now realized, a kind of alcove between the bookshelves that she had not noticed prior to its being lit up. The figure was indeed a statue, almost exactly the same height as she was.

“Who is she—who *was* she?” Astra asked.

“Ishtar,” Eli said with emphasis. “The great goddess Inanna, known as Ishtar, also as Astarte . . .”

“Oh my God . . . Oh my God . . .” Astra whispered. She turned her face away and crossed herself. Eli let her be for a few moments.

“I can’t believe it . . . it’s impossible!” Astra said as she regained her composure. “She looks—looked—so much like me . . .”

“You could say it the other way,” said Eli, “that you look so much like her!”

Astra put her hand out and touched the frozen face, then the round breasts. “So much like me . . . I am so much like her,” she said softly.

“And you also bear her name,” Eli said. “Astra, the Celestial One. Astarte . . . Ishtar!”

“It’s so lifelike,” Astra said.

“Yes,” said Eli. “It was found at Mari, an ancient capital on the Euphrates River. When the archaeologists who had found it were photographed standing beside it, no one could distinguish between the living men and the stone goddess . . .”

He turned the statue around on its pedestal so that Astra could see its back.

The protrusions from which the horns curved up in front could now be clearly seen as ear phone like devices. At the back of the helmet a squarish box was held in place with a stripe. From the bottom of the box, a hose made of several sections descended almost the whole length of the statue. The equipment the goddess was wearing must have been rather heavy, for it was supported by the large shoulder pads and was held in place by two sets of stripes that crossed her back and chest diagonally.

“The Flying Goddess,” Astra said. She went over the features with her fingers, then turned the statue around to face them.

“Why?” she said. “Why the statue?”

“To convince you.”

“And the sixth finger—did she have it?”

“It was removed surgically on the eighth day after birth—a rite echoed in the Jewish circumcision of eight-day-old baby males. . . . Here you can see, however, that the sculptor, true to life, left telltale scars where the sixth fingers and toes would have been.”

Astra touched the spots.

“I see,” she said. “She *was* like me. . . . I am like her.” She turned to face Eli. “Am I as beautiful as she is . . . was?”

He grabbed her by the hips and drew her to him. “You are!” he replied and kissed her on the lips, a long, passionate kiss.

“I am ready,” she whispered. “Ready to go back . . .”

“Come then, my beloved queen,” he said as he held her tightly against his body. “We shall journey together . . . to the past!”

She reached for his mouth and kissed him passionately. “I’m ready,” she said. “I was Ishtar . . . I want to be Ishtar again.”

“You will have to trust me completely,” Eli told her. “You must believe, with all your innermost senses, that whatever happens, no harm will come to you.”

“I trust you, my beloved . . . my Gilgamesh!”

“Tonight is the night,” he said as he caressed her. “The night of the rites of the Sacred Marriage, to seal the sacred union. . . . The night of endless lovemaking, the night Ishtar and Gilgamesh were joined as one . . .”

“Take me back,” she said softly. “I must find the tablet, answer Anu’s call . . .”

“We will go back together,” he said. “We must regress together . . . to Erech, to the night of the falling stars . . . united in body and soul!”

Eli led her into the alcove where the statue was standing, and Astra realized that it was a small elevator, one of those old-fashioned ones that had neither door nor protective grillwork.

They squeezed into the three-person elevator, the statue serving as their co-passenger. Eli pressed a button, and they rose slowly to the floor above. They stepped into a large, dimly lit room, engulfed in the same yellow-golden light in which the statue was bathed inside the elevator. As she entered the room, Astra turned her head back to glimpse the statue once more, and again, as when she had seen it initially, she could not help marveling how lifelike it was.

A large canopied bed, taking up a good deal of the room, suggested to Astra that this was Eli’s bedroom. If so, it was a most unusual one, for in every available space there stood, or hung on the walls, ancient artifacts: statues of all sizes, statuettes, wall reliefs, and objects of clay, bronze, and even gold. Her particular attention was drawn to an ancient lyre; it looked familiar because Astra had seen its picture and its counterpart in the British Museum many times. Its two stems rose in a slight angle from a sound box and were connected at the top by a crossbar. The front of the sound box curved into the sculpted head of a horned bull made of gold. Strings ran from the upper crossbar to the bottom of the sound box, and when Astra plucked the strings ever so lightly, she was startled by the deep sound of music that the instrument produced.

“It’s a replica, of course,” said Eli. “A replica of the original, almost five thousand years old, found by Sir Leonard Woolley in the royal tombs of Ur. . . . It belonged to the Sumerian queen Pu-Abi.”

Astra plucked the strings again. “What an exquisite sound,” she murmured.

“Archaeologists found not only lyres and harps, which they reconstructed and restrung, but also ancient Sumerian musical notations,” Eli told her. “After deciphering the musical notes, a team of California professors actually played the ancient music. . . . Here, it has been recorded.” He touched an unseen button, and the room was filled with an enigmatic, haunting tune—a tune from another time and another place, yet one that Astra found neither strange nor unappealing.

She looked around at the roomful of artifacts, wondering whether they too were just replicas or genuine archaeological finds. Eli caught her roving gaze.

“I work in the museum,” he said, “restoring, replicating. . . .” He waved his hand at the collection of artifacts. “I had to re-create the surroundings, the mood of ancient Sumer, to go back amidst the familiar objects of our beloved Erech.”

“The tune . . .” Astra said. “It evokes memories . . .”

“Lyre music was a favorite of Anu and Ishtar,” Eli said. “On his last visit to Earth, the Anunnaki built Anu a restplace that was the forerunner of Erech. They installed there a most magnificent lyre for his pleasure. When he left, he bequeathed the place to Ishtar, his beloved Irnina. She loved to play the lyre, even composed much of the music.”

Astra’s head began to swirl and she stopped gazing around. The tune was haunting her, each pluck of the lyre’s strings echoing in a pluck-beat of her heart. She drew herself to Eli and stood silently with her body against his.

He kissed her gently on the forehead. “The nectar, the music . . . they are taking you back . . . floating, floating back in time . . .”

“I feel dizzy,” Astra suddenly blurted out, and abruptly sat down on the floor, her back leaning against the canopied bed. Eli let her be.

She began to hum the lyre's tune, then she began to sing, almost whispering at first, then louder, then ever so softly:

"Sleep, oh sleep, some to my son,
Put to sleep his restless eyes.
Shine, shine oh new moon,
Chase away the evil pain.
Oh Enlil, be his guardian on Earth,
Oh Anu, be his guardian in Heaven.
Oh, Goddess of Life, be his ally;
May he lord for many happy days . . ."

"It is beautiful," Eli said and sat himself on the floor beside her.

She looked at him as though she had not seen him before. "Is it you, Shamash?" she asked. "Mother was always singing this lullaby to you. She was always concerned about your aching bones. She could not understand why we were growing up so fast. . . . Do you remember, Shamash?"

He put his hand around her shoulder. "I am Gilgamesh, not Shamash," he corrected her gently.

"She used to tease us that we had spent only a hundred Earth years in diapers," Astra went on dreamily. "They all refused to recognize that we were ripe. . . . We had to play when others were away. You always pretended at first to be someone else. . . . Why?"

"It was more fun that way," Eli said.

"Play with me again, Shamash," Astra said. "I need you so!"

"Yes," he said and kissed her on the forehead. "Let us play!"

He got up and pulled her up too. Holding her tightly against his body he began to sway the two of them to and fro, very gently, in tune with the rhythm of the ancient music—to and fro, to and fro, standing in place, without moving the feet.

"We are together again," he said softly.

"We are together again," Astra repeated his words.

"Tonight is the night," he said.

"Tonight . . . is this the night?" she queried.

“Yes, my queen,” he said. “It is the night of lovemaking, in Erech.

“Hurry, take me there!” Astra said, command in her voice.

“Together. We must go back *together,*” Eli insisted.

“Together . . . let us go together,” Astra said.

Letting go of her but with their bodies close enough to feel each other’s warmth, Eli began to undress her. Astra realized what he was doing but did not try to stop him, for she was both mesmerized and willing. When she was completely naked, he led her to a closet and from inside it took out a gauzy, see-through robe; he helped Astra put it on.

There was a full-length mirror on the inside of the closet’s door, and Eli positioned it so that when Astra looked at herself, she could also see the statue standing inside the elevator behind her. Astra was aghast by the similarity, and for a moment—in her confused state between fantasy and reality—she wondered who was who, which was she—alive—and which was the statue—only lifelike. . . . Was she Astra, the reality—or was the reality, the everlasting reality, that eternally frozen goddess behind her? She passed her hands over her body, first from her firm breasts down to her round hips, then back up again to her shoulders and neck and face, ending with her thick dark hair.

“I am Ishtar!” she cried out. “I am the one!”

She was still viewing herself and the statue in the mirror when Eli appeared behind her. He was naked and his build was sturdier and more athletic than his clothed body had suggested. Before she had a chance to turn toward him, he grabbed her by her breasts, hard, almost violently.

“Oh my beloved,” he said, breathing heavily. “The similarity struck me the very first time I saw you. . . . I knew then that fate found you for me. I’ve planned this evening ever since, each moment of it . . .”

She smiled with anticipated pleasure as she felt his body pressing against hers.

“Make love to me, Shamash,” she said, “but keep out the seed!”

Eli did not bother to correct her again, but turned her around to face him and then kissed her in a frenzy.

“Let’s not tarry,” Astra whispered. “Teach me love, Shamash . . . Hurry!”

“Yes, yes, beloved Ishtar,” Eli replied. “But you must lie on the Bed That Floats, until the king is ushered unto you.”

He led her to the canopied bed and gently helped her lie down on her back so that half her body remained protruding off the edge of the bed, her feet bent to reach the floor. There was a hammock spread on the bed, which Eli proceeded to raise with the aid of pulleys attached to the ceiling, lifting Astra to midair.

“You are making me float,” Astra said dreamily.

“You are in the Bed That Floats,” Eli said, “devised by the chief of artisans so that you may have your pleasure as you prefer it, without a man coming into your bed . . . But soon the prescribed hour shall strike, and I, the king, shall come unto you for the Sacred Marriage!”

“Hurry, hurry, play the lovemaking game!” she said impatiently.

He reached for a switch and a rotating light on the ceiling began to flash alternating red and blue lights. He pulled her see-through robe apart and kissed her on her breasts. She smiled but remained motionless, staring at the rotating ceiling lights. He spread her legs apart, resting each leg on one side of the hammock. Then he began to rock the hammock to and fro, toward him and away from him, entering her again and again with each inward swing.

“We are together once more!” he said. “I am caressing you from within, so that we shall journey together until the moment that I will enter your bed and, pleasuring you as the sacred rites prescribe, become the king again!”

“Oh Shamash,” she said. “I love it so . . .”

He kept rocking the hammock, continuing to penetrate her on each upward swing of the hammock.

“Bliss, bliss . . .” Astra said, groaning with pleasure. “Mother said I am too young to marry. . . . I don’t know what I would have done without you!”

“My, how grown you are!” Eli said lightly, indulging her in the idea that he was Shamash, Ishtar’s twin.

“You have just begun to grow a beard, and all you think of are spacecraft,” Astra said, anger in her voice. Then she chuckled. “The pilot that has been teaching you flying has also been teaching *me* a thing or two . . .”

“Everyone admires your beauty.”

“Mother is worried, Shamash. . . . Grandfather Enlil has spoken to our father about me. Have you heard the rumors? They are arranging a marriage, a union of the two sides . . . to cement the peace, they say . . .”

“Marriage,” Eli said. “A Sacred Marriage.”

Astra remained silent. Eli stopped rocking the hammock. Moments later Astra began to shudder and stir restlessly. Eli caressed her, saying nothing.

“Your touch is divine, my beloved Dumuzi,” Astra said softly. “The music is enchanting. . . . Let the musicians play on as you come to me . . .”

“The musicians are playing,” said Eli, caressing her, again seemingly unperturbed that she had called him by yet another name.

“Oh don’t be shy, my beloved Dumuzi,” she said. “Though only betrothed, it is no reason to spare me thy love . . . come on, come on, keep rocking me!”

Eli began to swing the hammock backward and forward, and moments later began to penetrate her once more. “We are joined again. . . . We are one,” he said.

Astra began to hum. “Tell the musicians to play louder,” she implored. “I wish to sing the praises of my betrothal. . . .” And without waiting, she burst into a melodic song:

“The bridegroom is by my side; what joy!
The wild ox Dumuzi, is by my side; joy!
The songstresses chant a song;
A song for him Ishtar will compose:

“I am like a field of fallow land,
The wild ox beside me with its horn, ready to plow.

We are in a heavenly boat of fastened ropes,
Our passion is rising, like the moon's new crescent.

"My breasts are as hillocks,
My thighs are like a rolling field.
My body is like wet soil;
Where is the ox that will come plow my fields?

"My Lord Dumuzi; he will plow my fields.
My sweetheart, he will come to me.
Oh my Lord Dumuzi,
Sing with me our song of love!"

Eli kept rocking the hammock while she sang, penetrating her in a rhythmic motion. They were both silent for a few moments. Then Astra began to twist in the hammock, and Eli had to stop.

"What is it, my beloved?" he asked.

Astra began to wail. "Oh woe unto me!" she cried out, sobbing. "The shepherd who has slept by my side has been taken away! The evil one made them carry him off. . . . My wild ox, my beloved Dumuzi, lives no more!"

"Anu has given you Erech that you may have kingship," Eli said, caressing her. "He has given you his divine lyre, that you may find peace in its music."

Astra's wailing now turned to a sobbing. Her writhing stopped. He went on caressing her.

"The musicians are playing," Astra spoke up. "Why are the singers quiet?"

"I have composed a song exalting your greatness," Eli said. First softly, then with a gradually rising voice, he began to sing:

"I sing to Ishtar, great mistress.
Oh voluptuous lady, oh queenly one.
The day has passed, the sun has gone to sleep.
The great lady is in the bed of rejoicing.
She is clothed with pleasure and love,

She is covered with charm and vitality.
Her eyes are asparkle, her figure is alluring.
Sweetness is in her lips, Life is in her mouth.
Ishtar is in the bed of kingship."

A smile spread on Astra's face. "Who is he who exalts me thus?"

"The king, your servant," Eli said. "The king has come unto thy holy bed, to lie in thy holy lap, that he may have life."

"The song is sweet," Astra replied dreamily.

Eli bent over and kissed Astra on her lips. "We are together again," he said, "joined together for a journey to eternity!"

He began to lower the hammock until Astra was lying on the bed proper.

"My queen," he whispered, "thy holy bed has been set up and purified."

"No one can come into my bed and live," Astra said, raising her right hand.

"Tonight is the night," Eli said, taking her hand in his. "It is the night of the Sacred Marriage, the night of our sweet betrothal."

"The king alone can betroth me!" she said. "Beware, beware, mortal man!"

"I *am* the king," Eli said. He bowed by the bed, kissing Astra's feet. "The king is prostrate before thee. . . . I am Gilgamesh, king of Erech, son of Ninsun, seed of Shamash . . ."

"Gilgamesh, the king?" Astra said. "Your coming is timely!" She extended her hand. "Come, make my bed as sweet as honey, give me pleasure!"

"I have come to be joined with you, great Ishtar," Eli said as he stood up. "To be granted everlasting youth, a living forever."

"My sweet Gilgamesh," Astra said, extending both her hands. "Waste not the hour. . . . Come to me now!"

"Great lady who gives life," Eli said. "I will perform the rites to perfection!"

Slowly he began to position his naked body over hers, caressing and kissing hers as he moved forward. “Heavenly lady, divine Ishtar,” he said softly, “the king has come unto thy holy bed, to lie in thy holy lap . . . to be joined together, to journey back together.”

“Hush!” she said, annoyed. “Embrace me, give me joy, Gilgamesh!”

She grabbed hold of him, locking her hands behind his back. With all the strength still left in him, Eli penetrated her.

“We are joined!” he shouted. “We are journeying back together!”

“Oh my precious sweet,” Astra said, groaning. “Sate me, sate me . . . In unison make it the prescribed fifty times!”

Freed of the hammock’s restraining ropes, she twisted and turned like a wild lioness released from its cage. She kissed him, she bit him, she clawed him with her nails, all the while clinging tightly to him as though they were held together by the most powerful magnets. As her ecstasy increased, she cried out unintelligible words and sentences, at times calling Eli Gilgamesh, at times Shamash or Dumuzi.

“Oh my queen,” Eli murmured as the pace of his penetrations quickened. “We are journeying back together, to Erech. It is the time of the New Year, the night of the Sacred Marriage. . . . We are in thy heavenly bed so that you may give me life . . .”

He poured his seed inside of her. Then he shuddered, and turning over to lie beside her, was motionless.

Astra groaned. “You have done it,” she whispered, then she fell silent too.

4

In spite of his utter exhaustion, he awoke, restless and distraught, soon after he had fallen asleep. Afraid to awaken the goddess, he lay still for a while, engrossed in a surge of thoughts. In the past, this divine night of ecstasy had becalmed him and granted him temporary inner peace. It was not so this time—but, he thought, not because of any fault on his part. Indeed, in spite of the passage of yet another year, he had performed to perfection, the required fifty times!

Unable to contain his restlessness, he finally slipped out of the canopied bed, after making sure that the goddess was sound asleep. The night's chill reminded him that he was naked. He found his robe and put it on, ungirdled, but he did not put on his sandals and held them in his hand lest the noise of his steps awaken her.

He paused at the chamber's entrance, listening for unwanted sounds, but all was quiet. The musicians and singers were long gone; the attending priests and priestesses had retired to their quarters and the lone priest attending to the eternal fire, by whose light the water clock's time could be told, was fast asleep at his post. Stepping quickly but silently, he crossed the Hall of Merrymaking, passing extra quietly by the doorless openings leading to the food chambers, where some of the food and beverage servers might have stayed to sleep.

This night he was appreciative of the fact that the Gipar, Ishtar's pavilion for nighttime pleasures, had been built according to her instructions at the edge of the Garden Court, near a small side gate in the Sacred Precinct's wall. This was a convenience devised by her to facilitate the comings and goings of her chosen lovers, who had to conduct intercourse standing up and rocking the goddess in her hammock if they wished to remain alive past the night. The particularly secluded location of the gate now enabled him to reach it

virtually unseen by the priests stationed on the platforms and ramparts of the main temples.

He put on his sandals and girdled the robe tightly against the chill. The Moon, almost full, bathed the Sacred Precinct in a silvery light, darkened from time to time by passing clouds. He waited in the shadows for a darkened interval, then quickly made his way to the small side gate. He was hoping that the priests guarding it would be asleep too. In the alternating light and darkness he could see two of them seated, leaning against the wall. But as he neared them, they heard his footsteps and jumped up, spears in their hands.

“Who goes there?” one of the priest-guards shouted.

“It is I, Gilgamesh, the king,” he replied.

“The king is with the goddess in her chamber,” one of the guards said. Gilgamesh approached them.

“The heavenly queen wished to sleep alone for a while, and I yearned for the cool fresh air,” he said.

The guards now recognized him. “The air is cool indeed,” one of them said.

“Is the city quiet, its folks asleep?” Gilgamesh asked, pointing his hand beyond the gate.

“Indeed,” said the other guard, the younger of the two. “After ten days of anxiety and penitence, everyone is exhausted.”

“The rites of the New Year festival are indeed demanding,” Gilgamesh said, “even for the common people, to say nothing of the king.”

“It’s the fear, the gods’ fear,” the older priest-guard said. “Though the gods have come back from the Akitu House every year, the fear is always in the people’s hearts when the gods depart the Sacred Precinct, lest they go and don’t ever return.”

“Then the High Priest would prolong the fasting from one day to at least one week,” Gilgamesh said. There was sarcasm in his voice.

“Fasting and penitence cleanse us of our sins,” the older priest-guard said. “The people have the rest of the year to indulge in their pleasures.”

“Oh well,” Gilgamesh replied. He stepped closer to the gate as though to peek beyond it into the street. “The streets are never as quiet on other nights.” His advance made the two guards move closer together, blocking the exit with their bodies.

“No one can leave the Sacred Precinct before sunrise,” the older one said. He stared at Gilgamesh, grasping the spear in both of his hands. “Not even the king!”

Gilgamesh stared back at the priest, the gaze of their eyes locked for a long moment. Then he stepped back.

“I have just come out for the fresh air,” he said. “For a short stroll in the Garden Court. . . . This is my only chance, once a year, to view the Sacred Precinct at night, when the Lord Sin holds sway, and not in the bright daylight of the Lord Shamash.”

“Your Majesty,” a voice from behind him said, “the goddess might awaken.”

Gilgamesh turned around. A priest, huddled in his brown robe against the cold, his face hidden beneath the hood, stood against the wall a short distance away. He had approached them stealthily, for none of them had heard or seen him come. “You must return to the chambers,” the priest told Gilgamesh.

“It is one of the Gipar’s attendants,” the older priest-guard said. “They all wear those brown robes.”

The Gipar-priest motioned the king back to the pavilion. “The goddess might awaken,” he repeated.

“Indeed, a timely warning,” Gilgamesh replied. He viewed the gate again. The two guard-priests were still blocking it with their bodies, spears held tightly. “But not before I regard the awesome temples touched by the rays of Sin, my great ancestor.”

He turned and walked back into the middle of the Garden Court that separated the Gipar from the Great Temple. He stood for a while, contemplating the magnificent structure dedicated to Ishtar, a temple whose high and massive columns, decorated with multicolored clay nails, were unmatched in the whole land. By day the immense columns dwarfed the worshippers who came to deliver their offerings in thanksgiving to Ishtar for benign events or to pray to the goddess to avert evil happenings. But now, with not a person

around, the columns' mosaics reflected the moon's rays as giants, whose prowess was replaced by immobility.

"Your Majesty . . ." a voice spoke from behind.

Gilgamesh turned to look. It was again the priest from the Gipar. Gilgamesh waved him away. "Not yet," he said.

He turned and shifted his gaze to the Eanna, the House of Anu, which was built atop an artificial platform that rose in ever smaller stages, one atop the other. The uppermost level served as Ishtar's private quarters, distinguished from all the others not only by its elevation but also by the series of poles bearing paired rings that flanked its doorway. It was said—but no one except the gods themselves knew for certain—that it was by way of these paired rings that Ishtar could hear words whispered far away, by Enlil in Nippur and by Shamash in Sippar, which was even more distant than Nippur. Colored streamers were now fluttering in the wind, having been attached to the poles by the assembled gods in reaffirmation of Ishtar's destiny as the reigning goddess of Erech. Each pair of streamers bore the color of its god, a symbol of each god's acceptance of the supremacy of Ishtar. It was too dark and the doorway was too far away for Gilgamesh to be able to distinguish the colors of the streamers, but he knew that in daylight he could distinguish those belonging to his mother, Ninsun.

"Oh my mother," Gilgamesh said softly, as though she could hear him through the fluttering streamers. "How it pains me to see you subordinated . . ."

"Your Majesty," the voice behind him firmly said, and the priest of the Gipar now touched the king's shoulder with his hand.

Gilgamesh turned toward him abruptly. "How dare you touch the king!" he said angrily.

"Your Majesty. I am a servant of Niglugal," the priest whispered.

"A servant of my chancellor? In a priest's garb?"

"Unseen eyes, unheard ears," the priest said, bowing his head lightly. "For the king's safety . . ."

"I had no idea," Gilgamesh said. He raised his hand toward a large structure that could be seen beyond the Eanna ziggurat. "Was it not

enough that my mother, scion of the great gods, was made to stay in the Irigal, its agglomeration of chapels and sanctuaries dedicated to Ishtar's parents Nannar and Ningal, her grandparents Enlil and Ninlil, her brother Shamash, ten lesser deities allotted to Erech, and an assortment of priestly residences?" He turned to face the priest. "Was all that not enough, that as I had begun to perform my duties of the Sacred Marriage, the goddess . . ."

He stopped short in midsentence, and his raised hand dropped to his side.

"My Lord Gilgamesh, do not prolong your absence," the priest said. "You must be by the goddess's side at sunrise, or on the morrow, instead of being crowned, you shall die."

"Yes, on the morrow," Gilgamesh said. He pointed to the western corner of the Sacred Precinct, where atop a hill a white structure gleamed in the silvery light. "There, at the White Temple that has stood from the days of yore, there will they fix my destiny." He made a laughing sound. "The goddess and the High Priest . . ." He turned to the priest. "Do you know, faithful servant, what destiny awaits me by their hands?"

"No, my lord," the priest said softly.

"Never mind," Gilgamesh said.

He turned his gaze back to the side gate and surveyed it and its guards for a few moments. The gate was now locked, the guards standing together in front of it. Again Gilgamesh looked at the White Temple of Anu, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I had better be gone inside," he said.

* * *

It was precisely at sunrise that Ninsubar, the chamberlady of Ishtar, entered the Gigunu, Ishtar's intimate bedchamber, to awaken the king and escort him out. She did so gently, letting Ishtar sleep on undisturbed.

Outside the chamber a group of male priests was waiting. They led Gilgamesh to the main temple, to the chambers where he had been prepared for the sacred night. There they disrobed him and bathed him and dressed him in a white robe.

“Thou art consecrated unto the Queen of Heaven,” the chief of the priests intoned in the tongue of the ancient scriptures, “but are not yet king again.”

Then, in a procession of priests ahead of him and behind him, he was marched to the main gate of the Sacred Precinct while the chief of the priests proclaimed seven times, “Be gone and come back, oh consort that shall be king.”

The king’s chamberlain, Niglugal, was waiting at the Great Gate with an entourage of palace officials and armed heroes. Gilgamesh crossed arms with him. There was an unspoken question in Niglugal’s eyes.

Gilgamesh smiled and said just one word, “Perfection!”

The tenseness in Niglugal’s eyes vanished. “The king has done well!” he announced to the royal group. “Benevolent fates will be decreed for the year!”

After he had thus spoken, the whole group burst into laughter and cheers, then organized itself into a procession to take the king back to his palace.

The customary route led from the Sacred Precinct that was laid out on a raised platform overlooking the city, through the Great Gate and down the Avenue of Processions to the business sections of the city, where commerce and industry thrived in many narrow streets that bordered the city’s renowned wharfs. It then went up the broader Royal Avenue to Palace Mount, in the northern section of the city, where the Royal Palace stood. As in past years, even at this early hour, townspeople were already beginning to gather at the Great Gate, expecting to gain premier admittance to the Sacred Precinct for better viewing of the afternoon’s ceremonies. But unlike previous years, there was less hailing of the king as he emerged through the gate—a fact that did not escape Niglugal, but which Gilgamesh, too absorbed in thoughts, failed to notice.

“Let’s take the shorter route,” Gilgamesh said to Niglugal. “I must talk to you quickly, in private.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty,” Niglugal said, and issued the necessary marching orders.

The shorter route led along the southeastern wall of the Sacred Precinct, then along its northeastern stretch, past the gate that had been visited by Gilgamesh during the night. From there a street led down to the Northern Canal that had been created by past kings, by deepening and widening a natural gully. It was then just a short walk up Royal Mount to the main gate of the palace. Having arrived earlier than expected, the throng of palace functionaries, soldiers, and servants that was usually gathered to greet the king on these occasions was not there. Those who had been alerted by the watchmen on the ramparts came running toward the gate, shouting the customary blessings of “Long Life!” and “Abundance!” as Gilgamesh passed through the gate. He waved to them and smiled, murmuring, as required, the same blessings. But he did not stop to acknowledge the individual greetings of this or that palace official, and with quick steps he walked briskly to the palace’s private chambers. Only Niglugal followed him there.

“What is wrong, my lord?” Niglugal asked.

“The goddess!” Gilgamesh said as he pulled off his robe. “She did not pronounce the required blessing, although I performed to perfection!”

“This is unheard of,” Niglugal said. “Incredible!”

“You had better believe it,” Gilgamesh said. “And she behaved most erratically throughout the rites. ‘Bizarre’ is the word to describe it! Ignoring my pleas to promise me life, she lapsed again and again into remembrances of her past loves and conjugations. One moment she imagined that her partner was Shamash, her brother, when they were children. Then her espoused Dumuzi, or even the great Lord Anu himself! She giggled and wriggled and cried and called out in anguish. And to add offense to insult, she failed to pronounce in the end, after I had performed the required fifty times to perfection, the traditional words sealing the sacred union!”

“I can’t believe it,” Niglugal said. “It is the law of Anu and Enlil, great lords. The goddess must pronounce the prescribed blessing, ‘Your coming is Life, Your entering my bed is Abundance, Laying with you is great Joy, Thou art Consort and King!’”

“The words are correct, but the goddess did not utter them. And she also ignored all my words to her, about not meeting a mortal’s end on account of my being two-thirds divine.”

“A most unusual behavior. And very perplexing,” Niglugal said.

“I suspect Enkullab to be behind it all, that scheming half-brother of mine,” Gilgamesh replied, putting on one of his own robes.

“Indeed, I’ve been trying to find out what the High Priest is up to,” Niglugal said, pointing in the direction of the Sacred Precinct.

“Ah, yes,” the king said. “I have encountered one of your spies in the night’s course. . . . A good man, that one. He stopped me from forcing my way out through the private gate . . .”

There was a puzzled look in Niglugal’s eyes. “Your Majesty?”

“I was about to take matters into my own hands, Niglugal,” Gilgamesh said. He stepped toward the long table by the wall. “Has the royal household run out of wine?” he asked angrily.

“Forgive me, my lord,” Niglugal hurried to say. “The servants must have tarried.” He clapped his hands, and as an attendant appeared he whispered to him. A moment later wine was brought in, and Gilgamesh gulped down a cupful.

“Have you heard more through your spies?” he asked.

“Enkullab has been having many audiences with the goddess,” Niglugal answered, “but no one knows what they speak of in secret. But we do know what goes on in the city. . . . The priests encourage the people to speak out against you . . .”

“The bastard!” Gilgamesh said. “Though the fifth day’s divestiture of the king’s royal attributes is just a symbolic act, the priests took away my crown, scepter, and sacred mace with earnest determination. And Enkullab, as I stood before him on my knees for the confessional, slapped my face and pulled my ears with a vengeance! I could see the burning jealousy in his eyes, as though he wished that it were he who would spend the sacred night with the goddess. What do you say, Niglugal?”

“There is more to it than that,” Niglugal said. “The people have turned against you.”

“Against me? Is that true?”

“If you wish to know the truth, Your Majesty, then that is the truth. . . . The city is full of violated brides and husbands who refuse to consummate marriages. Your wrestling matches with the newlywed grooms—the bride’s virginity being the prize—make the young leave Erech. They go to Ur to worship Nannar, or even worse, farther south to Eridu, where the House of Enki lords. Your daytime wrestlings leave behind broken doorposts and smashed carts. ‘Gilgamesh is not a worthy offspring of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda,’ is what the people are saying.”

“They wish perchance to see another offspring on the throne, perhaps the Crown Prince?”

“My Lord Gilgamesh,” Niglugal began. “May I speak without raising the king’s wrath?”

“I can stand the truth.”

“It is out of loyalty and devotion that I speak,” Niglugal said, weighing his words. “When kingship was granted to Erech in days yore, your forefather Meskiaggasher was High Priest at the Kullab, and the gods anointed him king as well. One man was both High Priest and king. . . . Enmerkar his son, and Lugalbanda, the son of Enmerkar, were warriors and explorers seeking knowledge and glory and an everlasting name in faraway lands. Because the priestly duties require daily attendance, they were only kings and the high priesthood was given to their brothers. Now Enkullab has been saying that the time has come to recombine the functions.”

“And make me, the king, the High Priest?” Gilgamesh said, breaking into a roaring laughter. “And neglect all the maidens and wrestle not the heroes?”

“No, to make the High Priest king, after the example set by Meskiaggasher.”

Gilgamesh said nothing for a moment, pouring himself more wine. “Enkullab forgets the lineage, his and mine. Meskiaggasher was a son of the great god Utu, born by his union with the chief priestess of Sippar, and he had the mark of the sixth finger. . . . Enmerkar had the divine mark, and so did Lugalbanda, and so do I!” He held up his hands to show Niglugal the telltale scar, as though the chamberlain had to be reminded. “Yes, I have the mark on account of my descent

of Utu and of being the son of the goddess Ninsun, and thus I am two-thirds divine. But Enkullab, though the son of my father he is, was born to a mortal mother. Therefore Enkullab inherited from our father the post of High Priest, but I was the legitimate son for the kingship. Has he forgotten all that?"

"He says that your sins have disqualified you."

"A neat scheme," Gilgamesh said. "How will he achieve it?"

Niglugal shrugged his shoulders.

Gilgamesh began to pace the chamber. "The High Priest," he said, "enters the Holy of Holies all alone. There is a chest there, my father once told me when I was a child, that was placed there at the time of Anu's visit a thousand years ago. It is made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, and there are winged images cast of gold touching their wings atop it. No one knows how, but once a year, on this day of Fixing of the Fates, the voice of Anu is heard from the chest, conveying the oracle to the High Priest. Only he alone is there to hear the holy words. Then he comes out and pronounces the message of the Heavenly Father."

"Yes, I've heard it told that this is what happens there," Niglugal said.

"Don't you see? The High Priest is there all alone!" Gilgamesh stopped to face Niglugal. "All alone! So, he can come out and say whatever he wants to say!"

"That indeed is a danger," Niglugal said, "but even Enkullab would not dare change the holy words of Anu, for the Heavenly Father would strike him dead!"

"He must have already said things to the goddess, evil words about me that made her skip the blessing," Gilgamesh said, hitting the table with his fist. "I wonder what's coming next!"

"Be not too concerned," Niglugal said. "Your divine rights are inherent, and of the divine sixth finger Enkullab is lacking. The gods will never anoint him king."

"Your words are reassuring, Niglugal," Gilgamesh said, embracing his chamberlain. "You are a good friend . . . which reminds me. Where is my comrade Enkidu?"

“Having gone to the temple at sunrise, I have not seen him yet.”

“Well, he ought to be at the temple rites this afternoon.”

“As a creature of the Lord Enki, he is immune to mortal fate,” Niglugal said, “but I shall seek him and relay to him your wish.” He bowed and stepped back to the door. “Now, better take a well-earned rest, my lord, for the afternoon’s rites will be long and tiring.” And with these words he departed.

* * *

In her two-story house, Salgigti was supervising the post-nocturnal activities. A broad-bosomed woman of medium height and raven hair, she was simultaneously shouting orders to her girls, supervising the baking of the sweet cakes, and counting the customers’ coins as they were leaving.

“The day is short—hurry, hurry!” she kept yelling at the girls. “We must dress in our festive clothes and get early to the Sacred Precinct!”

It took awhile for the commotion to die down. Straw mats were spread on the ground near the oven, from which two young women were deftly extracting the thin round cakes and piling them upon a large clay plate. At the well in the center of the courtyard two other young women filled a large jug with cool water. Another young woman brought a basketful of dried dates and figs out of the house.

“Where is Tiranna?” Salgigti shouted.

“She is still in the room with that Westerner,” one of the others said.

“I’ll be cursed!” Salgigti shouted. “Wake them up! That sailor knows no fill!”

“No need to,” a man’s voice was heard coming from the second floor. “I am up and leaving, thanks to all the commotion and shouting!”

“It’s about time you left, Adadel,” Salgigti shouted back, “an ungrateful one that you are!”

He came down and into the courtyard, girdling his leather garment. “Why can’t a man have some peace and quiet hereabouts?” he asked, protesting.

“It’s the eleventh day, the Day of Anointment,” Salgigti said. “The day the king would regain the kingship that had been stripped away . . . if he survived the night.” She giggled and the other women burst into laughter.

“Did he?” Adadel asked as he fished inside his garment for the coin pouch.

“He certainly practiced much,” Salgigti said, roaring with laughter.

“I still can’t make out your New Year customs,” Adadel said. “In the Cedar Land that is beholden to Shamash, whose celestial emblem is the sun, the festival is over when the sun rises on the eleventh day. Here, your rites continue with a Sacred Marriage between the goddess and the king who is no longer a king. Then you spend another day restoring him to the throne.”

He handed Salgigti a silver coin. She kept it in her open hand, still held out. “Tiranna has been good to you,” she told him. “Have I not been a good hostess?”

He looked at her and smiled. “Here,” he said, giving her another coin. “When does this endless festival end?”

“We are in the domain of Sin, whose heavenly counterpart is the moon,” Salgigti replied. “Our days begin at sundown only. After the king is reinvested and the sun goes down, the twelfth day shall begin. It’s the time of the Fixing of the Destinies. An oracle shall be pronounced by the High Priest, delivering the word of Anu, determining the king’s and the people’s fate for the coming year . . .”

“And then the gates shall be opened?”

“On the morrow. The assembled gods shall leave then. The city gates will be opened.”

“The twelfth day,” Adadel said. “The celestial number.”

“But you, my dear, must depart *now*!” Salgigti said and walked to the exit door. “Shall we see you tonight?”

“I doubt it,” Adadel said at the door. “We have been stuck here long enough. I’d better make preparations to sail in the morning.”

“May the gods be with you,” Salgigti replied as she let Adadel out, locking the door behind him.

“Now girls,” she said back in the courtyard, “let’s eat and dress and be ahead of the crowds at the temples.”

* * *

The closing ceremonies of the New Year festival were due to start in the late afternoon, one hour before sundown. However, as Salgigti and her girls made their way there, the Avenue of Processions—which flowed into the Sacred Precinct’s Great Gate—and the streets leading to it, were already abuzz with people. Clearly, many others were eager not only to position themselves as close as possible to the site of the ceremonies but also to be there when the various participants arrived.

The closer the female group got to the temple area the denser the crowd was, for the populace was held back at the gate until all the participants had arrived. Soldiers as well as guard-priests at the boundary of the sacred area kept pushing the crowd to maintain a path for the dignitaries and the king. By the time Salgigti and her companions advanced to within sight of the Avenue of Processions, they could progress no more.

The first to begin arriving for the proceedings were the Elders—sixty of them—all of noble birth, many of them retired palace or temple functionaries. They all were bearded, as befitted the elderly, but could and did wear garb of their choosing and individual tastes, including their headgear. As they reached the gate and were identified, they were directed to the courtyard of the Great Temple, there to assemble until it was time for them to begin the Holy Procession.

Next to arrive was the king and his royal entourage of high court officials and a bodyguard of chosen heroes, also sixty in all. The king wore his royal robes and the crown, but his scepter and mace were carried on a golden tray by the chamberlain, Niglugal, marching in front of the king. The priests showed this royal group to the side of the great courtyard that faced the Elders.

And then, precisely one hour before sunset, when the twelfth day would begin, horns were sounded and drums were beaten, and the Divine Procession arrived in the courtyard from the direction of the

Eanna. It was led by the High Priest, a wooden staff in his hand. He was wearing a skull cap and a toga of crimson color, and the sacred breastplate of magical stones. He was followed by the other eleven chief priests, their ankle-length white wraps trimmed with crimson fringes.

“The Queen of Heaven is come among you!” the High Priest proclaimed as the group began to enter the great courtyard. “The Twelve Gods are come among you!”

And as the Elders and the royal group and all the priests who were in attendance, as well as the crowd outside who heard the proclamation, bowed and fell to their knees, bearer-priests carrying the Twelve Gods on litters—Ishtar and Ninsun among them—marched into the center of the courtyard.

They remained bowing until the High Priest announced in a loud voice: “Let the rites of the Fixing of the Fates begin!” And with that as a cue, the crowds were let in through the Great Gate. The people rushed up to the barriers designed to hold them off from the ceremonial great courtyard, so that they could begin to witness the proceedings.

Seven times did the High Priest proclaim the prescribed formulas for starting the rites and assuring their auspicious outcome, and seven times there came shouts of hurrahs from the crowd in response. Then the Holy Procession began the slow march, to drumbeats, toward the White Temple of Anu.

Leading the procession were incense-dispensing priests, their heads shaven and their togas the color of pomegranates. They were followed by the Elders. Slowly they mounted the monumental stairway, and when they reached the platform atop the mound, they stood at its edge, facing the podium. Representing the citizenry of Erech, they were later each to sign as witnesses the tablet on which the afternoon’s events would be inscribed.

They were followed closely up the stairway by the royal segment of the Holy Procession. And no sooner had that second group arranged itself on the platform, on the side facing the White Temple, than the divine group, led by the High Priest and the twelve other priests, began its ascent.

Atop the mound the gods alighted from the litters and mounted the stairs to the podium, where Ishtar sat down on her lion-shaped throne. A smaller, less decorated throne next to hers remained unoccupied. Other seats for the eleven other deities were set in a semicircle. The gods took these seats in an order that had been prearranged.

There was a hush as all eyes were on Ishtar. Then she raised her right hand. “Let the rites begin,” she said in a commanding voice.

Niglugal, the chamberlain, stepped forward to face the podium, and holding up the golden tray, said: “Oh great Queen of Heaven, Queen of Earth! The king, thy bridegroom of the Sacred Marriage, is among us.” He stepped forward and put the tray at Ishtar’s feet, then stepped backward.

“Let he who is called Gilgamesh come forward,” Ishtar commanded.

Gilgamesh stepped forward and, reaching the podium, bowed. “I am Gilgamesh, the king,” he said, “I lay my kingship at thy feet, oh Queen of Heaven, Queen of Earth!” And he put the crown that was on his head at her feet.

“Thou hast espoused me on the night of this day,” the goddess said, “in accordance with all the rules and to perfection.” She grinned as she said the last words. “Divine Dumuzi had been both spouse and royal shepherd, my beloved consort he was. No mortal can be both, except on this one day. . . . Let Gilgamesh be anointed!” From where she sat her voice was heard not only upon the platform but also in the courtyards all over the Sacred Precinct.

“High Priest proceed!” Ishtar commanded, and all eyes turned toward the White Temple and the group of priests standing along its wall. They now parted to reveal the entrance to the temple, and the unusual tree growing in front of it. It was a date palm that grew out of a sapling planted by Anu himself when he had visited the place. It drew its water from cisterns hidden below the platform’s paved floor, where the rainfall was captured during the rainy winter season. There was also a sealed cistern atop the temple, hidden from view, where the rainwater falling on the temple’s roof was stored. On this day, the one and only day of the year, the sluices of that cistern were

opened so that a water fountain threw up its liquid arches on both sides of the tree.

All those atop the platform watched reverently as two priests emerged from the temple's doorway, one wearing the skin of a large fish and the other an eagle's wings and its beaked head as a face mask.

"Let him be witness who like the Lord Enki is," the High Priest proclaimed, "he who had come to Earth in the waters, the first to set foot, lord of wisdom, creator!"

The priest costumed as a fish stepped forward and stood to the right of the tree.

"Let him be witness who like the Lord Enlil is, lord of the Anunnaki, by whose word the Eagles pilot the Boats of Heaven, father of mankind!" the High Priest announced.

The priest costumed as an eagle stepped forward and stood to the left of the tree. Like the fish-man priest, he carried a pail. On a signal from the High Priest, the two filled their pails from the cascading waters.

"Let this be the Water of Life!" they proclaimed in unison. Then they each plucked a cone of the date palm seeds.

"Let this be the Fruit of Life!" they said in unison.

All who were present, gods and men alike, cried out, "May it so be!"

For a few moments the two costumed priests remained standing, facing each other as they flanked the tree, holding up the date palm cones in one hand and holding out the water-filled pails in the other. The dignitaries atop the platform and the great crowd below stood still and silent, awed by the appearance of the priests representing the two great gods and by the presentation of the Waters of Life and the Fruit of Life that endowed mortals with long life and gods with immortality, with Everlife.

"Let Gilgamesh be anointed!" Ishtar commanded.

The two costumed priests advanced to the podium, bowing to Ishtar as they reached it. Then they stood, flanking the kneeling Gilgamesh.

Ishtar stood up and stepped to the edge of the podium. The fish-priest raised his water-filled pail. Ishtar dipped her hand in it, then sprinkled the water upon the crownless head of Gilgamesh.

“Be blessed in the name of Lord Enki!” she proclaimed seven times, sprinkling the water upon Gilgamesh each time. “May life be thy water!”

The eagle-priest then raised the date palm cone, and Ishtar took it.

“Be blessed in the name of Lord Enlil,” she proclaimed seven times, touching Gilgamesh with the cone each time. “May fruitfulness be thy daily bread!”

Then she held up the crown for all who were assembled to see, and put it on the head of Gilgamesh. “In the name of the Lord Enlil who commands Earth, I grant thee kingship!” she proclaimed.

She extended her hand to Gilgamesh, and he stood up.

“As Mistress of Erech, I grant thee thy royal powers!” she announced, handing Gilgamesh the king’s scepter and the sacred mace. “Now,” she told him, “thou art both consort and king. Come and share the throne beside me until the Destinies are determined!”

She returned and sat on her throne. Gilgamesh mounted the stairs to the podium, catching his mother’s glance as he passed by her; the glance spoke myriad words of encouragement and affection. Then he sat down beside the goddess, on the smaller throne, for a while to be divine among the divines, a god among the gods.

“The gods have spoken!” Niglugal cried out. “Gilgamesh is king again!”

He looked in the direction of the Elders, but they remained silent.

“Watcher upon the ramparts,” the High Priest shouted in the direction of priests standing at the platform’s edge. “Has the disc of Shamash touched the edge of the skies?”

In the west, beyond the shimmering strip of the Euphrates River, the sun was a red disc on the horizon. All were silent atop the platform and in the crowds below. Then, with a suddenness that startled, although it was expected, the priest’s cry came, “The sun has touched the edge of the sky!”

Along the edges of the platform, priests lit torches.

“High Priest, let the Fixing of the Destinies begin!” Ishtar announced.

The High Priest stepped in front of Ishtar and bowed. “By the command of the great Lady Ishtar, by the will of the twelve assembled gods, I shall enter the Holy of Holies,” he said. “What Anu shall speak, I shall repeat.” He straightened and with both his hands pulled forward the breastplate of stones.

Ishtar touched it with her staff. “The stones of Nibiru are thy protection,” she said. “Enter where no mortal can enter, hear what no mortal can hear!”

The sun’s disc disappeared below the horizon, and at that precise moment the High Priest entered the temple, alone. A light wind was playing with the torches’ flames.

The group of major priests began to chant melodies from times ago —handed down from the time Anu himself had stood there, some said.

Suddenly a voice was heard from inside the temple. “Anu hath spoken!”

The chanting stopped abruptly. All eyes were on the temple’s doorway. Then the High Priest emerged. “Anu hath spoken!” he announced again.

He moved slowly to stand before the sacred tree, flanked by the two costumed priests. “Let him be witness he who like the Lord Enki is, let him be witness he who like the Lord Enlil is,” the High Priest intoned, and stopped.

In the total, unbearable silence, the words of Ishtar suddenly boomed, “High Priest, pronounce the words of Anu, Lord of Lords!”

Enkullab approached the podium, bowing. “Great lady, heavenly queen,” he said, his voice now also booming like thunder, “I have purified myself, put on pure linen. I uttered the incantations. I lifted the veil. I asked for the word of the Lord of all Lords.”

He remained bowed, his words ended.

The gathered dignitaries looked at each other in puzzlement. Gilgamesh and his mother exchanged glances.

“High Priest, pronounce the words of Anu!” Ishtar said impatiently.

“My benevolent lady at whose feet I am but a stool,” the High Priest said, “there has been a destiny for the city, but none for the king.” The High Priest Enkullab, Gilgamesh’s half-brother then prostrated himself before Ishtar to indicate his complete humility and his subservience to her.

There was stunned silence at first, then a murmuring among the Elders and a buzz of amazement and protest in the royal group. Gilgamesh started to arise from his throne, pointing his hand menacingly at the High Priest, when Ishtar herself stood up.

“Hush!” she shouted, and all fell silent. “High Priest,” she said angrily, “if Anu hath spoken, give us his words!”

“So be it,” the High Priest said, arising. He glanced about him, his glance shifting from one assembled group to the other. Then his gaze rested on Gilgamesh, their eyes meeting. “These are the words of Anu, the Lord of Lords,” Enkullab said.

“My words are inscribed,
My message is aloft.
The gates shall be open.
Who comes shall have Life.
The Land shall not be forgotten,
The people shall not be abandoned.”

Again there arose a din among those gathered on the platform, and also from the crowds below. Gilgamesh sat stunned, uncomprehending. Even the gods on the podium looked at each other, and Ninsun glanced at her son, bewildered too.

“As I have said, my lady, all great gods,” the High Priest took the opportunity to speak up, bowing toward Ishtar and the other deities. “There is a destiny for the land and the people but not for the king.”

“This has gone too far!” Gilgamesh shouted as he jumped up. Standing in front of the royal group, Niglugal drew his sword.

“Silence!” Ishtar shouted, raising the wand in her hand. Instantly, a beam—bright as lightning—shot up from the wand, and the accompanying boom thundered far and wide. A hush fell on the platform and in the courtyards below.

“The omen is for one and all,” she said. “*The message is aloft,* for it comes from lofty Anu, from the highest Heavens. *The words are inscribed,* for they are written in the Book of Life. *The gates shall be open* for all who are righteous. *Who comes through these gates,* the faithful followers of Anu and the House of Enlil, of Nannar, and of Ishtar, *shall have Life*. Thereby, *the Land shall not be forgotten, the people shall not be abandoned*. There shall be peace and prosperity and joy for all!”

There were murmurs of approval. Ishtar looked straight at the High Priest, responding to his puzzled look with a stern gaze.

“This is the meaning of the oracle,” she said. “These are the fates fixed for the land, for the people, for the king. Anu has decreed abundance!”

And then, no sooner than she had spoken the divine words, there came out of the barely clouded skies a flash of lightning, followed by an ominous rumbling thunder.

“Anu hath spoken!” shouted one of the priests, and he fell to his knees. And as the others looked at him and at the darkening skies, there was another flash of lightning that sliced the Heavens asunder. Thunder boomed—as though a drum as large as the Heavens had been struck by a drumstick as massive as the tallest tree.

“Anu hath spoken!” shouted other priests, who also fell to their knees, and the Elders, repeating the shouts, did likewise.

The seated gods looked at each other in puzzlement. Ishtar, hiding her own bafflement, began to come down the stairway. Hurriedly priests rose and rushed behind her, dragging the litter on which she ought to have been carried back to her abode. The other gods too, ignoring their litter carriers, also began to rush down. And, seeing the gods depart and the priests rushing after them in confusion, the Elders took off down the stairway too, muttering to each other their astonishment at the odd behavior of the High Priest and wondering what the meaning was of the enigmatic oracle and the celestial disruption of the proceedings.

And so it was that soon there was no one atop the platform save for Gilgamesh and the royal group. Suddenly a loud voice rang out, “Gilgamesh! Gilgamesh!”

There was general confusion at this, but then all saw the lonely figure upon the podium: a man as broad-shouldered as Gilgamesh and almost as tall. His crimson robe shimmered like red blood in the torches' flickering lights. It was Enkullab, the High Priest.

Gilgamesh stepped forward toward the podium. "You have found your tongue, my brother?"

Upon the podium, Enkullab raised his staff.

"Hear me, Gilgamesh, king sworn to righteousness!" the High Priest's voice rang out for all upon the platform and in the courtyards below to hear. "Once there were two men in the land, one a shepherd of many flocks and one who had but a little ewe lamb, and when the powerful shepherd desired a meal of roast meat, he took the poor man's lamb to satisfy himself. . . . What, oh king sworn to uphold the laws of Enlil, is the judgment of that man?"

"A punishment most severe, for great was the evil done," Gilgamesh answered. "Who is the man?"

"*Thou* art the man," the High Priest's voice boomed across the Sacred Precinct. "Thou art a shepherd of people, not of sheep, and the precious possession is not the man's lamb but his bride. Thou art a sinner, Gilgamesh, and thy punishment shall be most severe!"

"I am the king!" Gilgamesh shouted back. "I am two-thirds divine! My coming unto the maidens is an honor, not a sin!"

"Anu hath held back a fate determining for thee, Gilgamesh," Enkullab said calmly. "Thy fate is still in the scales, thy kingship is still in the balance, numbered are thy days!"

Gilgamesh stepped forward and stood before his half-brother, looking straight into his eyes. "The Water of Life was sprinkled over me!" he shouted, and now his voice roared too. "The cone of fecundity was touched to my scepter and mace! At the Tree of Life I was blessed. I am the king and shall be king, Enkullab!"

"The tree of Anu, Gilgamesh, is the tree of knowing truth," Enkullab said, raising the staff in his hand. "The divine words cannot be twisted. The omen shall come true!"

And, having thus spoken he turned and went down the stairway.

Niglugal came and stood beside the silent Gilgamesh. “He is after your kingship, my lord,” he said, “invoking alleged transgressions as his ploy.”

Gilgamesh put his hand on Niglugal’s shoulder. “Oh my faithful chamberlain,” he said, sadness in his voice. “Oracles, omens . . . the words of Heaven or the words of man? What does it all mean, Niglugal? What am I to do?”

5

It had not been the intention of Gilgamesh to roam the streets of Erech that night. But the events of the preceding night and day had upset and confounded the king greatly, and sleep evaded him completely. Enkidu, his comrade, was nowhere on the palace grounds to be spoken to and to hear soothing words from. Thus, Gilgamesh's thoughts turned to his mother, the goddess Ninsun. It was she who had advised him to press with Ishtar the issue of his mortality, and now that all his hopes seemed to crumble, his mother was the only one who was his link with the gods' longevity, the only one who could interpret the divine omens.

As one who had been residing in Erech, she could leave the Sacred Precinct after nightfall, without awaiting daylight as the other, nonresident gods, were bound to do. Had she stayed in the Sacred Precinct, or had she used her privilege to go to her favorite place in town? Gilgamesh did not know.

Attired in a simple robe and armed with only a dagger in his girdle, he left his chambers in the middle of the night and stepped briskly toward the palace gates. The guards, not expecting the king to take his leave this night, needed longer than usual to unlock and open the gates. Gilgamesh noticed their puzzlement.

"There was that thunder and lightning, with hardly a cloud in the skies," he told them. "I couldn't sleep, wondering whether the rains will come early this year. . . . What say the skies?"

"Everyone asks the same question, Your Majesty," one of the guards replied. "We all hope it was an omen of plentiful rains, but the skies have been cloudless."

"But it has been a night of falling stars," another guard said as he helped heave open the gate.

"How's that?" Gilgamesh asked.

“Indeed so,” the other guard said. “We’ve seen one falling star cross the skies, then another. It is a night full of omens, Lord Gilgamesh.”

They looked up at the skies, and Gilgamesh did too. The skies were cloudless and the moon, almost full, was shining brightly.

“There!” a guard shouted suddenly. “There’s another one!”

He pointed to a spot in the skies, and Gilgamesh and the other guards looked up in that direction. Indeed, against the background of a skyful of shimmering stars, one seemed to be moving—making a grand arc along the Celestial Circle. From moment to moment it loomed larger and larger, displaying a reddish tail as it came closer. Instinctively the guards shielded their eyes. Only Gilgamesh stood immobilized, watching the bright reddish star falling toward the Earth.

“It’s falling on the palace!” one of the guards shouted, and they all fell to the ground.

For a moment Gilgamesh thought that it was coming directly at him, and he raised his hand defensively to shield his face. A moment later, however, the shooting star seemed to be falling toward the Sacred Precinct. And then it disappeared from view beyond the palace walls, somewhat to the north.

“It’s an omen, a sign from the Heavens—for *me*!” Gilgamesh cried out, and before the guards could even get up and ask the king whether he wished to be accompanied, Gilgamesh rushed out of the gate.

Half running, half walking fast, he set his course toward the direction in which the falling star had disappeared from view. The street leading down from the palace was empty and no sound came from the houses that stood on the side opposite the palace—a quarter of the city inhabited by court officials, scribes, judges, and others of the city’s nobility and high lay hierarchy. He reached the intersection of Palace Street and Merchants Street, the latter leading south to the port area and the marketplaces, but Gilgamesh took it north, toward the Garrison Quarter. There one had to cross a short bridge over a creek that dried up in summer but filled up with water in winter, when the sluices connecting it with the canal were opened.

As he neared the bridge he could hear voices, excited voices, and as he approached the creek he could see people rushing toward the bridge. They too, he realized, must have seen the falling star.

Some had crossed the bridge and some had come from the other side. By the time Gilgamesh had reached the spot where the falling star appeared to land, there was a small crowd on both banks of the creek as well as on the bridge. When the crowds recognized the king, they parted to let him get closer to the creek's bank.

"It's there! It's there!" they shouted, pointing to a reddish object half-buried in the bank. But all Gilgamesh could make out was the object's elongated shape, which seemed to turn blacker as the moments passed.

As the crowd grew larger, some foot soldiers who were patrolling the streets arrived on the scene, and as the pushing, shoving, and jostling for position intensified, the soldiers formed a protective guard around the king lest he be trampled or pushed down into the creek. The growing commotion soon attracted a platoon of soldiers, headed by a captain from the Garrison Quarter across the bridge. Some noblemen also appeared, awakened and attracted by the crowd's din.

Under the king's instructions, the captain ordered some of the soldiers to climb down the creek's bank for a close look at the object, which by then had assumed a shiny black color. Even as some obeyed him, they stood away from the thing. The crowd shouted words of advice, how to grab hold of it or how to pull it up, and admonitions not to dare touch the divine handiwork or the fallen star —if that's what it actually was.

Finally, disgusted with the chaos, Gilgamesh ordered the soldiers to push the crowd away from the banks of the creek. From the bridge and accompanied by several daring noblemen, he climbed down the creek's bank toward the fallen object.

For sure, he had never seen the likes of it before. Made of a shiny material now completely black in color, its portion that protruded from the ground had the appearance of a mushroom—a thick, round, elongated stem capped by a wider, flatter, circular top. The object might have been likened to a heavenly fish, for it also had fins

protruding from its observable portion. The object's stem, cylindrical in shape, was of such girth that one man could not have embraced it with his arms.

Courageously, one of the noblemen touched the object with his sword, and as nothing happened, banged on it. There was a muffled, hollow sound from inside, but there was no clang as when metal strikes metal. Then another nobleman, encouraged, touched the object with his hand. It felt warm.

"There's life in it!" he cried out as he jumped back. But the object remained motionless, soundless.

Prompted by Gilgamesh, the noblemen tried to grab hold of the object. But try as they would, it proved too slippery to hold on to. They put their shoulders to it to shove it, but it was firmly imbedded in the soil and would not budge. Giving up, the noblemen stood gathered about the object, touching its smoothness, admiring the shiny surface. Amazed by the object's shape and awed by its celestial origin, they began to debate its meaning and purpose.

"It's the handiwork of Anu," concluded one of them, and they all readily agreed, for the object had indeed come from the Heavens, the abode of Anu. With that realized, the noblemen fell to their knees and, bowing to the ground, began to kiss the celestial object. Some murmured prayers, and as the reverence grew in fervor, one after the other, the noblemen began to distance themselves from the sacred object.

It was then that a group of priests reached the site, having come from the Sacred Precinct. The crowd parted for them, their shouts briefing the priests as to what had happened and where the object lay.

"It is an omen from the Heavens," said the leading priest as he looked down from the creek's bank. "An omen sent by Anu as the New Year festival is about to end."

The crowd began to shout amens. "It is an omen the likes of which has never been seen before," the priest continued. "It is truly the handiwork of Anu, for the great gods alone to touch and accept. . . . Woe unto the man who violates this sanctity. . . . Within the year, surely he will die!"

With fear thus instilled in their hearts, the people distanced themselves, pushing and shoving as they moved back. The noblemen too quickly climbed up and away, wishing they had never touched the object. Only the priests remained standing at the creek's bank, and Gilgamesh, alone, stood down by the celestial omen.

"Great king," said the leading priest, "get thee back from the handiwork of Anu! It is an omen for the gods, not for mortal man!"

"I am no mere mortal," Gilgamesh retorted. "Two-thirds of me are divine! This is the omen spoken of in the Oracle of Destinies. It is an omen for *me*!"

Without waiting for the priest to respond, Gilgamesh again neared the fallen object. First he felt it cautiously with his hands. It was almost cool by now, its life, if indeed it had one, gone. He put his ear to its smooth surface and listened; he could hear a peculiar hum. Using his dagger he began to strike the object gently; there did not appear to be any effect. He hit it harder, and there was a muted thud, like the sound of a belly struck after much drinking of beer. He walked around the object, striking it with his dagger here and there, hoping it would recoil if life it had. Then, suddenly, as he hit one spot, there was a hissing sound.

"It's a serpent, a heavenly serpent!" Gilgamesh cried out and stepped back. Then, to his utter amazement, he saw that while the imbedded object remained stationary, the upper part began to rotate, rising slowly as it rotated. Then it stopped, as did the hissing sound.

For a few moments Gilgamesh stood still, watching the mute object. Then, his courage regained, he stepped to it and grabbed its upper raised part. He had only intended to examine it, but his pulling caused the upper section to come off the embedded stem.

Not expecting this to happen, Gilgamesh let the section go, and it fell to the ground with a dull thud. An opening in the section that was still stuck in the ground could now be seen, and Gilgamesh cautiously went down to take a look. Though the round opening was wide—wide enough for a man to pass through—it was too dark inside for him to see any of the inner details. But he could hear a whirring sound, and after pushing his head in and probing with his hands, he established that the sound's source was a protrusion

shaped like a ball, about an arm's length inside the object. He put both his hands in to grab hold of the ball and pull it up.

At first nothing happened as he pulled, tilted, and tried to budge the protrusion. Then there was a sudden flash of light; his hands felt scorched as though he had thrust them into a fire, and his whole body jerked. But whatever he was holding on to now came loose, and Gilgamesh saw that he could lift off a kind of a cover that shielded something behind it. He put the cover on the ground and looked in again. The whirring sound was stronger, and its source was an object that emitted a dull, golden radiance. Like the whole contraption, this object was unlike anything that Gilgamesh had ever seen before, nor even heard described in the olden tales. But he was convinced that it was an omen from Anu directed to him, and the thought gave him courage to continue risking the unknown.

"What have you come up with, Lord Gilgamesh?" asked the leading priest, anxious to know what was happening down in the creek. He repeated the question, shouting it in case Gilgamesh had not heard him the first time.

"It's a puzzle, truly it is," Gilgamesh answered.

He put both his hands in and, uttering a prayer to Anu, grabbed the whirling, radiant thing. To his great surprise, it could be easily lifted. Though it felt metallic, it seemed to have little weight. But the minute he had lifted it, its radiance vanished and the whirring sound stopped. He took it out, and in the moon's light could see that he was holding a smooth disc, flat on top but slightly convex on the bottom. Quickly he put the disc into the inside pocket of his robe.

No sooner had he done so than there were footsteps behind him. He turned and saw the priests. Overcome by curiosity, they had finally gathered the courage to come down and take a closer look.

"Wonder of wonders it is," Gilgamesh exclaimed, "truly the handiwork of Anu!"

The priests looked at the uncovered stem and saw the parts lying on the ground.

"It's an opening within an opening," Gilgamesh said, "but it's empty inside. I have probed with my hands, and there's nothing there."

He held out his hands, palms up, for the priests to see that he held nothing. His right hand jerked involuntarily.

“It is an omen, an omen from Anu,” said the leading priest.

“If there is one, I don’t see it,” Gilgamesh answered. “Perhaps it’s a secret for a priest to unlock. . . . Go ahead, look for it.”

He motioned to the priest to get closer, as he himself stepped back. The leading priest took up the challenge, and in a moment the object was surrounded by the group of priests. Gilgamesh, ignored by the priests, climbed up the creek’s bank.

The crowd, no longer held back by the soldiers and eager to see what the priests would discover, pushed forward on the bridge and along the banks. With everyone thus preoccupied with what was going on below, Gilgamesh moved back, ignored by the crowd. And then, unobserved, he quickened his steps and was gone from the scene.

Following the curving street, he quickly distanced himself from the palace area and its adjacent affluent quarter. Winding his way through narrow streets and alleys, stopping to hide in the shadows whenever he heard nearing footsteps, he made his way to the Craftsmen’s Quarter, the area where the city’s many craftsmen and artisans lived, worked, and sold their wares. As a goddess, Ninsun had her own chapel and living quarters in the great Irigal temple within the Sacred Precinct.

But after the death of her latest husband, the High Priest who was the father of Gilgamesh, she began to spend more and more of her time—including the nights—at her favorite place of work: the House of Resuscitation in the Craftsmen’s Quarter. As one of the Healers, she devoted herself after the Deluge to helping ward off the diseases that had spread among the Earthlings, caused by the Deluge’s polluted waters and the ensuing proliferation of insects and reptiles. It was to the House of Resuscitation that Gilgamesh now hurried. When he reached it, he avoided the main gate. Instead he turned the corner into a side street. Reaching a certain spot along the wall, he looked for a particular brick and moved it. Magically, a part of the wall swung open to reveal a low opening.

It was a secret entrance by which Ninsun could come and go without being mobbed by the multitudes that always filled the courtyard, day and night. Gilgamesh bent over and went in and moved the brick again as he passed. In a moment the wall closed up, bricks and all, and there was no trace of the opening.

The compound's wall enclosed a rectangular area, most of which was taken up by a large courtyard where those who had come for healing encamped, waiting for their turn to be treated. A large house divided into several rooms served as the hospital and clinic. Several smaller buildings served as storage houses for cereals and water and beer, and one for the handling of the dead. There were two small houses in which the workers of the House of Resuscitation lived. And then there was the more solidly built, neatly whitewashed house that was the private residence of Ninsun, and the place where she kept the magical instruments with which she diagnosed and cured.

A maidservant was sleeping on a mat at the doorway and there was no way of going in except to awaken her. Keeping his hand on her mouth lest she cry out, Gilgamesh nudged her awake. When her fright was over, she recognized him.

"Is the goddess, my mother, here?" he whispered.

She nodded.

"Awaken her," he said. "It is a very urgent matter!" he added when he saw that the maidservant hesitated.

The woman let him in, and went ahead to awaken the goddess.

It was a few minutes until Ninsun appeared at the doorway of her inner chamber. As Gilgamesh saw her in the moon's light that shone in through apertures in the ceiling, he rushed forward, knelt, and kissed his mother's hand. It was a hand from which the sixth finger had been surgically removed soon after birth.

"Beloved son," Ninsun said, "what matter brings you here at this hour of the night?"

"It is a matter of life or death," Gilgamesh answered.

Ninsun pulled his hand to signal that he could get up. She waved to the maidservant to leave the room. Then she led Gilgamesh to a

divan, while she sat down on her favorite armchair, facing him.

Gilgamesh looked at his mother. “Oh my mother,” he said, “how beautiful and young you look! Like a young sister of mine, not like my mother!”

Ninsun held out her hand and touched her son’s cheek.

“My looks are deceiving, my son,” she said. “I look young only to Earthlings. Having been myself born on Earth, I have aged faster than those who on Nibiru were born. To transfer to Nibiru has been recommended treatment. . . . But I will not leave Earth before Ishtar uses her powers to grant you everlasting youth. Have you spoken to her of that?”

“I did, all through the night of nuptials. But she ignored my pleas.”

“Is that the matter of life or death that brings you here tonight?”

“No, a far greater matter.”

“Enkullab’s omen words?”

“He has threatened the death of a sinner upon me . . .”

“Indeed,” Ninsun answered. “His evil words were heard by all. He must have spoken them from the podium, where the divine words are made to be louder. Pay no attention to his words, Gilgamesh. Divine Ishtar has given her interpretation, and that is all that matters until the next New Year festival.”

“It’s not that, my mother,” Gilgamesh said. “It’s on account of the omen Anu has sent me!”

Ninsun looked puzzled. “Anu has sent you an omen?”

“Here,” Gilgamesh said as he took out of his robe’s pocket the disc he had pulled from the celestial object. He put it at his mother’s feet, his right hand jerking as he did so.

She looked at his jerking hand, then at the disc. “Great Anunnaki!” she exclaimed. “How did you come by this sacred tablet?”

“My mother,” Gilgamesh said, “during the night, having become restless, I wandered out of the palace. In the night, omens appeared in the Heavens. A star grew larger and larger in the sky. The handiwork of Anu descended toward me!”

Describing how he had rushed to where the object fell, the crowd, the commotion, and how he climbed down the creek's bank to where the celestial object had imbedded itself, Gilgamesh told his mother how he tried to pry it loose.

"I sought to lift it, but it was too heavy for me. I sought to shake it, but I could neither move nor raise it . . ."

Then he told his mother of the miraculous way in which the mushroomlike top had come off, how he probed inside until there was a flash, like a destroying fire. "I moved my hands into the depths . . . its movable hurler I then lifted and brought to you." His hand jerked again as he finished his story.

"Oh my son," Ninsun said, "your hand has touched a divine fire! Were you not two-thirds divine, your soul would have been as vapor by now."

She put down the disc and examined his hand. There was no scar or any other outward sign of accident. "There is nothing I can do," she told him. "The injury should heal itself." She bent forward and kissed him on the forehead.

"My mother," Gilgamesh said, "it is not my aching hand that is the matter. It is the omen of Anu that is the matter of life or death!"

"How is that?" she asked.

"Is the omen from the Heavens not the fulfillment of the sacred oracle?" Gilgamesh asked, his voice quivering with excitement. "Were not those the words, 'My words are inscribed, my message is aloft, the gates shall be open, who comes shall have life'?"

"Yes, those were the words transmitted by the High Priest."

"Don't you see, then? The oracle has come true! The inscribed message of Anu—'The gates of Heaven are open, who comes shall have Life'—I have been invited, my mother, like a god I have been invited to Nibiru, to have Everlife!"

Ninsun, versed in much knowledge, listened attentively to her son's agitated words. She was silent with thought for a while.

"What you have brought and put at my feet is indeed a Tablet of Destinies," she finally said, "a disc that bears secret knowledge, voiceless commands, perhaps even drawings concerning the ways

of the Heavens. But all that, Gilgamesh, is for the gods alone, for those who are Anunnaki. Mortal man, my son, to the Earth is shackled."

"I am two-thirds divine!" Gilgamesh cried out. "And some like me, only partly mortal, to the Heavens were taken. Adapa whom Enki fathered, and Emneduranki the first priest, and Etana the king of yore . . . And now, it is my turn!"

His hand jerked. She touched it to soothe the unseen pain. "They were born to mortal mothers, but were all fathered by gods," she told him. "Your father was a mortal man . . ." She paused, but continued to stroke the hand of Gilgamesh. "Yet, let us see what message is upon the tablet."

"The disc is smooth, there's no writing upon it," Gilgamesh said. "It is, by itself, the omen."

"The Writing of Heaven cannot be seen as a scribe's writing upon a clay tablet," Ninsun told him. "Come with me and I will show you."

She led Gilgamesh to her inner chambers. As they entered the last one she noticed the dagger in his belt.

"Remove it and leave it behind, for it is metal," she said.

As they crossed the threshold the darkened room came aglow with a bluish illumination, its source unseen. There was a stone altar in the center of the room, its top carved out. Ninsun placed the disc with the convex bottom in the curved cavity, causing a whirring sound to begin. Quickly the disc began to radiate a golden glow, such as that Gilgamesh had seen when he first discovered it.

"Look at the heavenly tablet," she told him.

Gilgamesh came nearer and looked at the disc. "The tablet is glowing," he said, "and I can see odd markings."

Ninsun touched a spot on the altar and a thin white stone that had the look of alabaster but was as thin as a blade of grass appeared from a side of it and moved slowly to cover the altar's top. The design on the disc now appeared, much larger and clearer, on the white surface.

"The symbols are strange. I've never seen the likes of them before," Gilgamesh said. "Is this the Writing of Heaven?"

Ninsun studied the symbols. “Yes, it is the writing of Nibiru,” she said, “and the tablet is indeed a Tablet of Destinies.”

She picked up a short ivory stick that lay beside the altar and used it as a pointer.

“I shall explain to you the hidden message,” she told him. “The tablet has eight segments. It contains all the instructions for journeying from Nibiru to Earth and back. Its first segment depicts the farthest Heavens, the route from Nibiru to Earth; it is called ‘the Journey of Enlil by the Seven Planets.’ The spacecraft, the tablet instructs, is to arrive in the northern skies of Earth, the part called the Way of Enlil. Its demarcation line is the line encircling the Earth where the three artificial mountains are raised.” She pointed out the three pyramids as she spoke. “There are technical instructions for the pilots in each segment, guiding them to the landing at the spaceport with its three runways. This is the Place of the Rocketships, from where they are launched skyward to reach the orbiting platforms manned by the Igigi, the first leg of the journey to Nibiru.”

“Just technical instructions?” Gilgamesh asked. “No message, no divine words?”

“The last segment, dealing with the liftoff, does have a command in it. . . . It says, ‘Return!’”

“I knew it, I knew it!” Gilgamesh cried out and hugged his mother. “It is indeed my omen, the call from Anu!”

She kissed him on the forehead. “One must be careful in divine matters,” she said. “The tablet and its meaning must be carefully considered.”

“I cannot wait!” Gilgamesh protested. “Ishtar has turned against me. The omen now comes from Anu, the Lord of Lords. To the Place of the Rocketships I must go, at once!”

His hand jerked again, and Ninsun put her hand on it to soothe it.

“My beloved son,” she said, “it is indeed a call from Anu, but alas, not for you.”

He shuddered. “Not for me? For whom, then?”

“It is for the Lady Ishtar. This is clearly stated, here.” She pointed the ivory stick to a place on the tablet. “It is Ishtar whom Anu has called for.”

“Great lords!” Gilgamesh cried out. “I have taken away a sacred tablet that was meant for the goddess!” He fell to his knees. “Oh my mother, what shall I do? This night I’ve taken the omen away, the night before I left Ishtar’s bed before sunrise. . . . Instead of life I have found death!”

“You left Ishtar’s bed on the night of the Sacred Marriage? Have you lost your mind?!”

“She ignored all my pleas. She herself was mad that night, deeming me to be her past lovers. . . . I wanted to run away . . . but I came back to her side before she had awakened.”

“Did anyone see you leave?”

“The guard-priests at the side gate . . .”

She pulled his head toward her lap and stroked his curly hair.

“My son,” she said softly, “word of your violation will reach Ishtar for sure, and that the tablet is missing from the heavenly missile will also be discovered. It is indeed a matter of life or death.”

“What shall I do, wise mother?”

She thought for a moment. “You must leave Erech, escape Ishtar’s dominion and her wrath,” she said. “Seek the protection of Nannar in Ur, or go to Shuruppak where my mother is mistress.”

“And end my days in exile, a corpse to be buried by the wall?” Gilgamesh said angrily as he stood up. “I am your son, divine mother, and offspring of the great Lord Shamash! If I cannot scale the Heavens, let me die by my own dagger, seated on my kingly throne!”

“Only the hasty defy fate with their own hand,” Ninsun said.

“Then let me go to the Place of the Rocketships, and face my fate on the hallowed ground!”

Ninsun contemplated her son. “That place, Gilgamesh, is distant, in the faraway prohibited region of the Anunnaki. No man can go there. . . . But there is another place, the Landing Place. It is in the Cedar

Mountains. If Utu shall take you there, its Anunnaki could transport you."

"I know not of that place, nor do I know the way to Sippar, to my godfather, Shamash," Gilgamesh told her.

"Here, let me show you," she said. She touched a spot in the altar, and its stone front vanished into the floor. There were shelves inside, and upon them were stored many discs. "These are the *Me* tablets that hold all knowledge. The Lord Enki, lord of wisdom, caused them to be made."

She took the Tablet of Destinies off the altar and put it inside on one of the shelves, replacing it with one of the other discs. She touched a spot and the altar was restored to its previous position, without a hint that it was hollow. Then she made the white sheet appear again.

"Take a look," she told her son.

It was the drawing of a map.

"This is the Land Between the Rivers," she said, "and the West Land beyond, that ends where the Upper Sea begins. These are the two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, that begin in the mountain-lands of Lord Adad and flow into the Lower Sea. Sippar is here, where the two rivers come closest to each other, almost touching." She pointed out the location with the ivory stick. "That is where the Edin begins, the godly place of abundance, all the way to the Lower Sea."

"And where is Erech? Where are we?"

"Here," she said, pointing with the ivory stick, "just off the Euphrates River. To the south lies Larsa and Ur, and beyond them Eridu, which has been the Lord Enki's abode from the time he first landed on Earth. To the north there is a long river stretch without cities, for the desert encroaches upon the river. But then there lie Borsippa and Babylon and Kish, and then Sippar."

"Borsippa is beholden to Lord Nabu, Babylon to his father Lord Marduk," Gilgamesh said, "and Kish has fought Erech since kingship was transferred to my forefather. . . . It is a risky way. And what about the Landing Place? Where is it?"

“In the West Land. The merchants’ caravans follow the Euphrates to almost where it begins its flow, then cross a desolate stretch until they reach a river that flows from two chains of mountains that face each other. The tallest cedars grow there, forming the Cedar Forest. Within it is the Landing Place, a place from before the Deluge.”

“The mountains stretch for myriad leagues,” Gilgamesh said, studying the map. “Where exactly is the place?”

“The place is a hidden place,” she said, “known to none but to the Anunnaki that are Eagles. But Utu, or Shamash as he is also known, is their commander. If you could reach Sippar and spread your plea before him . . .” She stopped in mid-sentence.

“What is it, my mother?”

“Ishtar,’’ Ninsun said. “She is his beloved twin sister. In her wrath she could put a curse upon you, barring any help from Utu!”

Gilgamesh knelt down, taking his mother’s hand. “The wrath of the Mistress of Erech I’ve already aroused,” he said. “Shall I meekly await my fate, or boldly take the risky course in search of my destiny? If I am to die, let it be remembered that I died reaching for the stars!”

She stroked his curly hair, then kissed him on the forehead.

“Go,” she said, “and I shall beseech the great Anunnaki for your safety.”

She took off her neck a cord from which hung a green-black object shaped like a midwife’s cutter for severing the umbilical cord. She put it around the neck of Gilgamesh.

“It is a stone that whispers,” she said. “Turn it upside down and rub it, and your words will be carried to me. . . . But use it sparingly, my son, only when in real danger.”

He kissed her hand and stood up.

“Let me take the Tablet of Destinies with me as a talisman, as proof that it is my omen.”

“No,” Ninsun said, “whoever can read its writing shall know you have stolen it away from Ishtar. Let me keep it here, well hidden, until you safely return.”

“So be it,” Gilgamesh said. He bowed toward his mother, then turned to leave, but stopped and turned back.

“By what way shall I go to Sippar, my mother?” he asked. “I’ve never undertaken such a long and distant journey.”

“Take Enkidu along,” Ninsun said. “He shall be your guide.”

“Enkidu?”

“Indeed so. The Lord Enki, his creator, has endowed him not only with immense powers but also with knowledge of many mysteries. Let him be your companion and protector and the one who shows the way.”

“I shall find Enkidu and take him along,” Gilgamesh said. He stepped forward and hugged his mother. “Shall I see you again, my holy mother?” he asked. “Will I sit once more on the throne of Erech?” There were tears in his eyes.

“Go, my son,” she said softly, “and the great gods will be with you.”

6

Leaving through the secret opening in the wall through which he had come, Gilgamesh walked briskly in the direction of the harbor. This was the city's international quarter, where caravans from near and far unloaded their merchandise, and boats plying the Euphrates River and the seas beyond docked at the city's piers. It was the more seamy part of the city, with inns and brothels everywhere, a place peopled day and night with merchants, caravaneers, and sailors.

Gilgamesh crossed several wider streets and followed many narrower streets and alleys, all hugging the contours of the city's topography. He walked hurriedly, careful to avoid not only the ruffians who lurked in dark corners but also the foot patrols, lest he be recognized and his whereabouts reported later. Quickening his pace almost to a run, Gilgamesh finally turned into an alley where he had no problem locating the house he was looking for. It was one of the few two-story houses in this section, and its doorposts were painted red. The king, however, did not need these signs to recognize the place, for he had been there before, more than once, on occasions when his forays into town to seek out newlyweds had ended with no bride to initiate.

Gilgamesh knocked lightly on the door, trying to avoid excessive noise, but getting no response, he knocked louder. Finally a woman's voice was heard from behind the door.

"Go away, come in the morrow! All the maidens are fast asleep now."

Gilgamesh could hear footsteps nearing the alley, sounding ominous in the night stillness.

"Open up, woman!" he commanded impatiently, "I seek Enkidu!"

"Everyone is asleep . . ." the woman behind the door began to say.

"Open up quickly. Hurry! I am the king!"

Now the woman obeyed. She had barely finished removing the heavy bolt when Gilgamesh pushed the door open. He burst in and quickly closed the door behind him. The woman was holding an oil lamp. Recognizing the king, she bowed to the ground.

“Is Enkidu here?” Gilgamesh demanded to know. “Since he has not been seen in the palace or elsewhere, he must be here . . .”

The woman got up but her body was still bent in a semi-bow. There was a wide grin on her beautiful face.

“Salgigti, you witch!” Gilgamesh said, laughing. “Ever since you met him on the steppe and let him taste a woman’s loins, he has come back to this place as though it was his home. Is the unsatiated one here?”

“Upstairs,” Salgigti answered.

In the manner of most two-story houses, this one too was divided into a series of rooms facing a squarish center courtyard—the ground floor rooms being devoted to household functions, the upper rooms for sleeping or nonmenial chores.

The upper floor was reachable by a stairway that led to a wooden balcony that ran along the inner perimeter of the upper rooms. A wooden roof, thatched with palm branches, protruded sufficiently to provide the balcony with shade; the central courtyard was open to the skies.

Gilgamesh grabbed the oil lamp from Salgigti and quickly reached and mounted the stairs. The doorways on the upper floor were partitioned with hanging strings of beads, and Gilgamesh pushed these aside to peek into the rooms as he passed by them. In the first ones he saw sleeping women, but in the larger corner room he saw Enkidu, sprawled on a large mattress between two young women. His short, stout body looked funny between the two heavy, large women he had chosen as his companions for the night. He was fast asleep, the long curls of his hair half hiding his face.

“Wake up, Enkidu,” Gilgamesh said, touching his friend.

Enkidu was awake in an instant, recognizing Gilgamesh. He turned to lie on his back and raised his hand in greeting. His stirrings awakened the two women, but he embraced them tightly and they could not move.

“It’s part of my schooling,” he said with a laugh. “The city Elders think that sleeping with the harlots will strengthen the human in me . . .”

“It’s no time for pleasantries,” Gilgamesh said. “We have matters to discuss.”

Enkidu let go of the women. “Be gone,” he told them, and they hurried out. He sat up. “Your coming here at this time of night bodes ill,” he said.

“Indeed. We must leave Erech, at once!”

“Leave Erech? In the middle of the night? I do not understand . . .”

“It is a matter of life and death,” said Gilgamesh, and he quickly told his comrade the gist of the recent happenings. “‘Go to Sippar and take Enkidu with you,’ my mother, Ninsun, said. ‘Seek the protection of Utu, out of Ishtar’s reach,’ she said, ‘and ask thy godfather for help to reach the Landing Place in the Cedar Forest!’” Gilgamesh concluded.

Enkidu shook his head in disbelief, his long curls moving like living waves. “This whole thing sounds more like a bad dream than a real happening,” he said, “and to escape from Erech is not the best solution either. ‘Go to Sippar,’ she said! To journey without escort is a most risky adventure, and to enter the Cedar Forest is certain death, Gilgamesh!”

He arose and put his heavy arm around the king’s shoulders. “Is it your heart’s fear that carried you away? Come, let me accompany you up the hill to the temple, for daybreak is near. Stand at the doorway of the Queen of Heaven, divine Ishtar. Offer her the Tablet of Destinies in sacrifice, pray and make amends. Then seek not her judgment but that of the Seven Who Judge. And, believe me, you will be spared!”

“Not being a mortal, you don’t understand what’s in my heart,” Gilgamesh said. “My fate has been called, and I must answer the call! The die is cast, Enkidu. To scale Heaven or to die attempting, that alone is the choice. . . . Are you coming with me, or as a coward, prefer to stay behind?”

“Gilgamesh,” Enkidu said. “You well know that of the death of mortals I have no fear. He who created me, the Lord Enki, made me

a man in appearance but a god in endurance. My bones are as bronze, my sinews as copper, blood have I none. Though short of stature, the strength of ten men I have! With my hand I shatter doorposts, with my foot I tumble walls, with my knee I subdue the bull. No, Gilgamesh, it is not for myself I fear, it is for you! For that which you might achieve is in doubt, but that which you'd lose is surely certain."

"A worthy speech," Gilgamesh replied, "but without conclusion. Are you coming with me or shall I journey by myself?"

Enkidu contemplated his friend the king, shaking his head in disbelief. "Fate has indeed overwhelmed you," he said, "and there's no persuading. . . . I shall go with you, my friend."

"I knew I could rely on you!" Gilgamesh said and hugged his comrade. "Now, what is the way to our destination and how do we get there?"

"The way I know, how we get there we shall find out," Enkidu said. "Come, let's start our preparations."

Making sure they did not awaken the other women, the comrades went down to the courtyard. Salgigti appeared there even before Enkidu could summon her.

"Salgigti," he said, "have your pleasure girls had strangers from afar come, calling on them these past few days?"

"Yes," Salgigti said. "Unable to depart during the festival days until this coming morrow, many have spent their time and money here."

"Good, good," Enkidu said. "Were they all sailors or ass drivers, or was there among them a merchant or a caravan master?"

"Some were and some weren't. . . . We ask no questions."

"Oh, don't be so virtuous, Salgigti," Enkidu said and smacked her on her behind, chuckling. "Perchance someone paid better than the others?"

"Most lavish has been Adadel, the Amorite merchant. He has traded in Erech honey and date wine from the Westland and is carrying wool and grains back to Mari."

"Is his a caravan?"

“No, he is captain of a boat, one equipped with sails, he was boasting to the girls. . . . A most generous patron, indeed he has been!” Salgigti said with some sorrow. “He’s sailing on the morrow.”

“A perfect destination!” Enkidu whispered to Gilgamesh. His eye caught in the shadows the sight of the two women who had been his nightmates, straining to hear the conversation. “Let the two women who were with me prepare two waterskins filled with water,” he said to Salgigti, “and two cloth bags filled with bread and cheese and some dates for sweetness.”

Salgigti motioned to the women, and as they approached she instructed them to do what Enkidu requested.

“Where do you keep discarded clothing?” Enkidu asked Salgigti. “The garments the men forget behind?”

She led them to one of the ground floor rooms, where such clothing was piled up in a corner.

“Let’s change into some of these,” Enkidu said to Gilgamesh.

“But they are worn-out and dirty!” Gilgamesh protested.

“And thereby perfectly befitting,” Enkidu retorted, and began to undress. Catching on, Gilgamesh followed suit, making sure to transfer the dagger he always carried with him to his new robe.

“What does Adadel’s boat look like?” Enkidu asked Salgigti.

She offered little information besides repeating that it had sails.

“We will find it,” Enkidu assured Gilgamesh.

From a coin pouch, which he kept as he changed clothes, Enkidu took out and handed Salgigti a silver shekel. She could see the bright metal shine in the light of the oil lamp she was holding up, and bowed her head in gratitude.

“I am at the king’s service,” she told him.

“Moreover,” Enkidu said, “if we do not return by the Spring Festival, you can also sell our clothing. But until then, not a word of these matters you or your women must utter, or the Lord Enki, my creator, shall strike all of you down wherever you might be!”

Salgigti nodded her head. “So it shall be, master Enkidu.”

He hugged her and kissed her broad mouth. “Take care of my women!” he said to her. Then, on second thought, he went and embraced the two women too. “There’s a full shekel of silver for each of you when I come back!” he promised.

“Come, let’s go!” Gilgamesh said impatiently. “I still have to have words with Niglugal, and say good-bye to my son . . .”

“And have the whole city awake by the time you’re ready to leave?” Enkidu interjected. “If you go back to the palace you’ll never leave, for the outcry over the handiwork of Anu will be spread by then!”

“Adadel sails soon after sunrise,” Salgigti told them, bowing her head.

Gilgamesh looked about him. The night’s darkness was indeed giving way to the encroaching dawn. Enkidu was holding the bags with their provisions. Salgigti stood silently, her head still slightly bowed. He could see the two women who had helped with the provisions huddling in a corner of the courtyard. He looked up to the upper floor. In a short while, he knew, the other women would be up and the place would swarm with gossiping females.

He broke out in a nervous laughter. “It’s a joke, the funniest and bitterest of my life!” he said. “Here I stand as a thief in the night in a brothel, called upon to make up my mind . . . to choose between kingship and life, between the past and the future. . . . Is this, Enkidu, the way it has been ordained?”

Enkidu did not answer.

“Open the door, pleasure woman,” Gilgamesh said to Salgigti, “and let me face my fate.”

* * *

In his bedchamber, Enkullab the High Priest was awakened from a restless and dream-filled sleep by his servant-priest. He awoke with a startle and was angry.

“The chief of the guard-priests must speak to you at once,” the servant said. “It is a matter of the greatest urgency, he said.”

“It could not wait for daybreak?”

“He said the High Priest must be informed at once.”

“Give me my robe and let him in, then,” Enkullab told him. Moments later the servant, holding a large oil lamp, ushered in the chief of the guard-priests, a tall and stout man, his garb distinguished by the leather belt girding it.

“What is it that you deemed worthy of robbing me of precious sleep?” Enkullab asked sternly, but without anger.

“Holy Father,” the chief of the priest-guards said, “an omen, the handiwork of Anu, has come down from the Heavens . . .” He bowed his head as he stopped speaking.

“Yes, yes, don’t stop!” Enkullab cried out.

“It appeared in the skies as a falling star, radiating brightness. It is a long black artifact, its body smooth as a snake’s, its head like a fish’s with fins, its hiss like that of a serpent . . .”

“The handiwork of Anu?”

“It has come from the Heavens, and it’s not a mortal’s handiwork, Holy Father.”

“The gods be praised!” Enkullab called out. “My prayers have been answered! Tell me more, all of it!”

“It appeared, as I said, as a falling star. . . . As it neared the Earth, it appeared to be destined toward the Sacred Precinct. But then . . . then it seemed to be headed toward the king’s palace.”

“It was I who had prayed for an omen!” Enkullab shouted.

“Holy Father, the handiwork of Anu touched the Earth northward, imbedding itself in the bank of the old canal.”

“Go on,” Enkullab told him.

“It was seen streaking down by priests upon the precinct’s ramparts. A group rushed there, toward the falling place. When they arrived, there already was a crowd, and soldiers . . . and the king.”

“The king, Gilgamesh, was already there?”

“Yes, Holy Father. The handiwork of Anu was changing colors, hissing and turning like a celestial serpent. Gilgamesh, the king, alone had the courage to touch it and wrestle it. Then the priests, reciting the appropriate hymns for divine protection, went down the canal’s bank and took charge of the object. It is deeply imbedded in

the mud, lifeless now, for its head came off when the king was with it."

"Was?"

"By the time the priests encircled the celestial object, he was gone."

Enkullab stood up, then began to pace the bedchamber. "An omen from Heaven, the handiwork of Anu, a most unique and sacred object, has been defiled by my half-brother the king. . . . The wrath of the gods must be aroused!"

"It's the will of the gods!" the chief of the guard-priests said. "Would the Holy Father get dressed and come with me to the site?"

"Yes, of course . . . the site must be consecrated as a place where Heaven touched Earth!" Enkullab said. "Now, tell me again about the object's falling. At first it appeared headed for the Sacred Precinct, then for the palace?"

"Indeed so."

"And the place where it landed, where exactly is it?"

"To the north of the palace."

"And when the king was gone, did the soldiers go with him?"

"No, a platoon has stayed behind."

"Then let's not waste time," the High Priest said. "Take as many priests as you need, and a wagon, and haul the omen to the Sacred Precinct as quickly as possible!"

"Lest the king's men do as much?"

"You've grasped it. Now go, hurry! I will dress and follow you right away."

"And if the soldiers object?"

"Invoke the wrath of the gods . . . you're a priest, aren't you?"

* * *

The approaching dawn had drawn all manner of urchins into the streets leading to the port area, that they might best position themselves for when the merchants, some driving laden asses, began to arrive. Some of these urchins tried to accost Enkidu and

the king as they approached, targeting Enkidu in particular as they were fooled by his short stature. However, the smack of his hand or a kick of his foot soon sent them reeling. The two friends hastened their steps, for well they knew that the nearing sunrise could trigger a rush to sail away, for it was the first moment such departures were permitted in the course of the New Year festival.

As soon as they arrived at the port, at its northern end leading to the Euphrates Canal, they made hurried inquiries as to the whereabouts of Adadel's boat and were directed to a large cargo vessel equipped with rows of oars and a tall sail. There was hectic activity at the dockside where the boat was tied, and all aboard her seemed awake and busy.

The comrades contemplated the situation. "We can offer to pay the boat's master to hide us below deck, among the merchandise," said Gilgamesh.

"Hiding invites betrayal," Enkidu replied. "We will hire ourselves as sailors instead."

"By the looks of it, he has all the hands he needs and is ready to cast off soon," Gilgamesh said.

"Stay here and I shall attend to the matter," Enkidu told him.

Taking a few strides, which were amazingly large for his stature, Enkidu reached the dockside. He accosted one of the men busily taking supplies onboard; a moment later the man fell to the ground and Enkidu dragged him aside. There was another man, untying the ropes that held the ship to the dock; a quick encounter with Enkidu, and he too was silently dragged away. Then Enkidu signaled to Gilgamesh, who came over quickly, and boldly the two stepped aboard, asking for the master, Adadel.

He was a middle-aged man, his dark hair mostly hidden by a head-cloth, his beard cut to a sharp point in the manner of the Westerners, and he was wearing a garment made of rubbed sheeps' skins.

"I need no more men," Adadel said. "Get off my boat, for we are about to sail."

"Not so," Enkidu said. "You are in need of men, for two of yours have vanished." Adadel looked at him, puzzled. He surveyed the dock and failed to see his two men. He called out their names, but

got no answer. He then took a close look at the shabbily dressed Enkidu and Gilgamesh, pondering the latter's short stature, wondering what this incident was all about.

"You doubt our skills?" Enkidu asked. He stepped to the ropes that tied the boat to the dock and with one pull snapped them loose.

"I see," Adadel said. "And what about your companion?"

Without a word, Gilgamesh went to the side of the boat and with his leg pushed it away from the dock.

Adadel contemplated them. "The pay is two shekels when we reach the city of Mari," he informed them. "The crewmaster will give you your assignments."

"And the daily rations?" Enkidu asked.

"And the daily rations," Adadel agreed.

Cut off from its moorings, the boat began to drift away from the dock. There were sounds of a commotion coming from the direction of the streets that led uphill from the port area toward the Sacred Precinct. Gilgamesh, a concerned look on his face, stared at Enkidu.

"Since we are hired, let's give the captain his shekel's worth," Enkidu said, grabbing an oar. With it he pushed the boat through the maze of other moored boats. Gilgamesh, grabbing an oar, did likewise on the boat's other side. Within moments, the boat was in the center of the wide port canal.

"Man the oars!" the crewmaster shouted.

The other men hurried to the rowing seats, grabbing oars. Shouting orders to the rowers, and aided by Enkidu and Gilgamesh on both sides of the boat, Adadel deftly directed his vessel through the confusion of waterborne traffic; it seemed that everyone was leaving at the same time. Shouts and curses were exchanged between captains, and fists were raised in anger. But it was all part of a routine, and in the absence of any mishap no one took the words and gestures seriously.

Thus maneuvered, the boat left the port area and entered the Euphrates Canal, the man-made waterway that connected the port of Erech with the great river and other waterways and the whole world beyond. The city's eastern wall was now on their right and its

diverse quarters on their left. Though most of the traffic was outbound, there were some inbound boats and rafts, and Enkidu displayed his skill and powers in pushing them away with his long oar. They were now nearing the sluices that guarded the entrance to the canal where it met the city's wall. Here there was a permanent guard post, for this was a vital military choke point. Quickly, Gilgamesh left his side of the boat and sat down among the oarsmen.

His abrupt move did not escape Adadel. He looked at Enkidu and caught his gaze alternating between Gilgamesh and the oncoming guard post.

"Whereto?" the captain of the guard shouted to the boat.

"To Mari," Adadel answered.

"May the gods be with you," the captain of the guard shouted, and waved the boat through.

They passed under the arched opening in the wall, flanked by two watchtowers. Here the canal widened. They were in open country.

Enkidu came and sat behind Gilgamesh. "We are safely out of the city," he whispered.

The sun was up in the eastern skies when they reached the wide, majestic river. There was an autumn breeze and Adadel ordered the sail to be raised on the mast. Soon the boat was sailing smoothly, rapidly upstream, in a northerly direction, propelled by the rhythmic rowing of the crew as well as by the wind.

Gilgamesh looked back at Enkidu. "Ishtar's wrath is behind me," he whispered. "I'm on my way to find Everlife!"

"Our journey has just begun, our perils are just starting," Enkidu whispered back.

From the deck above the crew deck, Adadel watched the twosome. "These are not two ordinary sailors," he murmured to the crewmaster. "We must learn more during the night . . ."

7

After Gilgamesh had left her, Ninsun could find no rest. She tried to lie down and catch some sleep, but sleep evaded her. She sat for a while in her armchair, pondering. There was no doubt that once the king's departure was found out, and the news of the celestial missive reached Ishtar, bedlam would break out. And what would Ishtar do when her wrath was unleashed? What would Enkullab do?

Ninsun went up, as she did often when her thoughts overtook her, to the flat roof of the house. To the northwest she could see the promontory, flattened and filled to form a vast platform on which the Sacred Precinct stood, the Eanna ziggurat rising above the skyline delineated by the massive wall surrounding the precinct. Shifting her gaze eastward, she could see the smaller promontory on which the king's palace stood. *Aye,* she thought, *there was a happier time when temple and palace were as one, when the Anunnaki, though loftier, were also less domineering over mankind.*

Way out there, beyond the line of sight to the palace, lay Shuruppak, her mother's abode. Absentmindedly, out of habit, Ninsun put her hand to her throat, to take and rub the Whispering Stone, to let her mother hear her speak. Only when she touched her naked throat did she recall that she had given the stone to her son. Still, she faced toward Shuruppak and uttered her thoughts. *Oh my mother, did I advise Gilgamesh right? Would he indeed leave Erech? When? How? And how should I deal with Ishtar's wrath?*

She could hear no answers. The moon, which had thrown its silvery beams into her chambers when Gilgamesh was there, was gone in the west. There was a darkness about, one that fills the time between the end of the night and the oncoming of dawn, a bad time for all who have had that watch as their duty. The cool breeze was unpleasant. She went down and called her handmaiden.

"Awaken the attendants, I wish to wash and dress and leave before sun-up," she said. "I am returning to the Sacred Precinct."

“Yes, great lady,” the handmaiden said. “Shall I alert the charioteers or the litter-bearers?”

“Neither,” Ninsun said. “I wish to leave unobtrusively. I will ride the he-ass. Now rush to the palace and give word to the chamberlain to come to me.”

It was almost daybreak when Ninsun left her House of Resuscitation through the secret side gate, with one attendant leading the he-ass by a rope and two quick-stepping behind her. She instructed them to reach the Sacred Precinct through the side gate of the Gipar. “I don’t think Ishtar is spending the night there this time,” she said, sarcasm in her voice.

The guard-priests, though surprised, recognized her and let her through. She dismissed the attendants and briskly walked toward the Irigal, the Great Temple where the divine residences were. In the great courtyard in front of the temple there was considerable commotion, for the attending priests were preparing the departure of the non-resident gods. Chariots were being brought out and arranged for the procession; he-asses, specially bred for the task, were being harnessed. There was a lot of shouting and braying in the process. In all the commotion, Ninsun, arriving on foot, was hardly noticed. Quickly she entered the Irigal and hurried to her chambers.

It was soon thereafter that the visiting gods, each wearing his favorite colors and the conical, horned divine headdress, started to leave the temple and alight their assigned chariots. They were all young—third and fourth generations of the Olden Gods who had actually come from Nibiru—and their jovial manner revealed their eagerness to leave the regimented, rite-filled confines of the Sacred Precinct for their rural, small-town abodes where they could freely roam.

But their banter was abruptly muted when a hue and cry arose in the courtyard, and shouts were repeated, “The great Lady Ishtar is coming!”

Her arrival thus heralded, Ishtar, Mistress of Erech, drove into the courtyard in her own gold-inlaid chariot. She was standing, holding the reins of two fierce lions harnessed to her chariot. She was

dressed in her hunting garb—the skins of two leopards—and was armed with a long bow, a quiver of arrows strapped to her shoulder. Attending priests were quick-stepping in front of the chariot, and others were running behind.

“The great lady will accompany the departing gods to the city gates, leading the procession!” the lead priest in her entourage announced.

“I will arrange the chariots accordingly,” the chief of the chariots replied. Then, turning to one of his aides, he murmured, “Pity the townspeople . . . Ishtar is in her hunting mood. . . . She will rush down the promontory, sweep through the streets of Erech, sowing panic in front and leaving havoc behind. . . . Then she’ll ride as a lightning out to the steppe outside the city to hunt gazelles or, with luck, fiercer animals.”

The chariots were lined up and the departing gods were beginning to move their assigned chariots when there was a disturbance at the precinct’s main gate and there appeared an odd procession. Two priests were leading a bull-drawn wagon with the High Priest behind it and more priests following him. They reached the middle of the courtyard and stopped. A large cylindrical object, black in color, was upon the wagon.

“What is this all about?” Ishtar demanded to know.

The High Priest stepped forward. “Great lady, Queen of Heaven, Queen of Earth,” he said, bowing to the ground, “there has been a sign from the Heavens.”

“Speak to the point!” Ishtar commanded. “What is that object in the wagon?”

“Great lady, great gods,” Enkullab said, “it is the handiwork of Anu, from Heaven to Earth come. It is a heavenly sign, worthy of your might!”

He prostrated himself before the goddess. The other priests fell to their knees. Ishtar dismounted her chariot, giving the reins to two trained attendants, and with a wave of her hand gestured them to drive the chariot away. Then she walked over to the wagon to take a look at the strange object. First she circled the wagon to see the object from all sides, then she touched it. The disclike top that was

separated from the object's main stem was also in the wagon. She could see the gaping opening in the cylindrical part, and put her hand in but could not feel anything inside.

"Tell me all," she said to Enkullab.

He stood up and told her what he knew, speaking loudly so that the other gods, and all others gathered in the great courtyard, should also hear. He described how some priests, stationed on the ramparts, had seen falling stars streak the skies. How one of them grew larger in size as it neared Earth. How it was falling toward the Sacred Precinct but missed it and fell to the north. How a group of priests rushed to the site, only to find the king there, probing the object. How they took charge, ordering the king to step back. How, when informed of the miraculous occurrence in the middle of the night, he, the High Priest, ordered that the celestial object be extracted from the canal's bed and brought to the Sacred Precinct in the bull-drawn wagon, to be presented to Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven and of Earth.

"It is an omen, fulfilling the oracle," Enkullab concluded. "Great events are coming! Evil shall cease and righteousness shall prevail, by the word of Anu!"

"The omen is for the gods, not for mortals," Ishtar said. "If a message it bears, it is for the gods alone to comprehend. Now, tell me, where is the king?" The priests who were at the site admitted that as they had become preoccupied with the object, they had lost sight of the king and knew not his whereabouts.

"He must have gone back to the palace," Enkullab suggested.

"Bring this handiwork of Anu to my temple and summon the king!" Ishtar ordered.

Unseen by others, Ninsun was observing and overhearing the goings on from a window in the Great Temple, the Irigal. At the words of Ishtar, she brought her hands to her mouth to stifle a cry, for at that moment she could see Niglugal entering the courtyard through the main gate. He evidently did not expect the assemblage that he came upon, for as he realized who was in the great courtyard he stopped short and began to retract his steps. However, he had already been spotted by Enkullab.

“Ah, the king’s chamberlain is come to join us!” Enkullab said in a raised voice. “The commands of Ishtar must have been heard in the palace.”

Niglugal fell to his knees and bowed to the ground. “Great lady, divine gods,” he said. “I humbly prostrate myself before you. I am Niglugal, your servant.”

“What is the king’s business in the Sacred Precinct?” Enkullab asked. Niglugal remained prostrate.

“Arise and speak!” Ishtar commanded.

“I have come to speak to the great Lady Ninsun,” he said as he stood up.

“Has she summoned you? And for what purpose?”

“It is about the king,” Niglugal began to say. He stopped and looked about him, uneasy. “The king has left the palace in the midst of the night and has not returned.”

“The priests have seen the king at the site of the fallen handiwork of Anu,” Ishtar said, pointing her whip at the object on the cart.

Niglugal looked at the direction she was pointing and went down to his knees. “Anu be blessed,” he said. “May we all be blessed by this omen.”

“It is a sign from Heaven!” Enkullab shouted. “The king’s fate is sealed!”

“Hold back your words!” Ishtar said angrily. “Let’s hear more from the chamberlain. . . . Now, tell us about the king.”

“The soldiers who rushed to the site of the falling star had indeed seen the king there,” Niglugal said, “but none has seen him thereafter. Palace guards were about to start a citywide search when I received word from the great Lady Ninsun to come here at once . . .”

“Did you hear that?” Ishtar shouted toward the assembled gods. “The king has vanished and Ninsun is in the know! The mother is in a conspiracy with the son!”

“I fear the worst, oh Queen of Heaven,” Niglugal said. “Let my soldiers search the city for the king . . .”

“The worst is yet to come if your king is not found!” Ishtar retorted. “Go, search the city, search every corner of it and bring Gilgamesh to me by evetime, be he alive or dead!”

“You are merciful, great lady,” Niglugal said, standing up. Bowing toward the other gods, he stepped back and departed quickly, followed by his guards.

“The oracle is coming true! A new year to Gilgamesh has not been granted!” the High Priest said as he stepped forward and fell to his knees before Ishtar. “Oh Mistress of Erech, proclaim his reign ended this day!” He waved his hand toward the perplexed gods. “The divine witnesses are all here!”

Ishtar surveyed the assembled gods. “I do not see Ninsun. Without her the twelve are incomplete . . .”

“End the sinner’s reign,” Enkullab pleaded. “It is the wish of great Anu!” There were murmurs of consent among the gods, but none spoke up.

“Now hear this!” Ishtar said, raising her voice so that all—gods and priests alike—could hear her. “We shall wait until evetime. If the king is not found or is dead, with the blessing of the Lord Enlil, the lord of kingship, a new king shall ascend the throne of Erech!”

“And who shall it be?” Enkullab inquired, humility in his voice.

“Let the gods who have been with us stay on in their chambers,” Ishtar said to them. “If a new king is to be crowned, my choice I will discuss with you.”

She turned to Enkullab. “Summon Ninsun to my temple. I wish to know more of her son’s scheming.”

“Like mother, like son,” Enkullab said. “I shall find her and bring her to you.”

The gods and priests, the latter bowing to the ground, waited for Ishtar to leave the courtyard before they too could begin to disperse. But Ishtar was hardly a hundred paces away when a voice rang out from above.

“The king has life! The omens are blessings! Gilgamesh is king!”

The loud words startled everyone. Their suddenness obscured their source for a minute. But it took just moments to realize that they

came from the direction of the sacred mound of Anu. As they all looked up toward the White Temple, they could clearly see the silhouette of a goddess, recognizable by the horned headdress she was wearing. She was standing atop the podium.

It took Ishtar but a moment to realize who it was.

“Great Anu!” she exclaimed. “It’s Ninsun. . . . How dare she ascend the sacred mound when no rites are being held, when the great Anu has not been summoned!” She pulled her bow off her shoulder and grabbed an arrow from the quiver. Angered, she ran back to a spot from which she could have an unimpaired view of the White Temple. She put the arrow in her bow and aimed it at the silhouette.

“No!” shouted one of the gods standing near her. “You will be buried alive, as was done to Marduk, if you kill her!”

Hesitating a moment, Ishtar lowered her aim and shot at the ground. The arrow struck with a great thud, and half of it disappeared into the soil.

“There are other ways to deal with sacrilege,” Ishtar said as she put the bow back on her shoulder. “Now go—go as ordered!” she shouted to all who were in the courtyard.

The High Priest did not move. “Sacrilege and treason, too,” he said with his head bowed.

“Treason?” Ishtar repeated his word. “Yes, I have been blind. This daughter of Ninharsag whom I have replaced in the Celestial Circle has been scheming to replace me as goddess of Erech! By Anu, you are right, Enkullab.”

“She and her son, my half-brother . . .” Enkullab added.

“By my word, Enkullab,” Ishtar said loudly, “if a king is to be chosen, you shall be the one!”

And before he could utter his wordy thanks, she left with quick steps to the Eanna.

The attendant priests and priestesses were hard put to catch up with her as she mounted the ziggurat’s stairway. On the second stage she pulled upon a brick, and a wall turned to reveal a large opening.

“Bring out my skyship! Hurry!” she commanded.

The priests on duty hauled out a wooden platform on which rested a large object shaped like a ball and supported by three extended legs. A priestess brought Ishtar her pilot's helmet, and the goddess quickly put it on. Then, pulling a lever at one of the extended legs, Ishtar caused part of the sphere's surface to open up, and from this doorway a flight of stairs noiselessly began to extend down. Moving gingerly Ishtar mounted the stairs and entered the sphere. In a moment the flight of stairs was retracted as though swallowed by the sphere. The doorway closed and the sphere's skin was as smooth as it had been before, like a wound healed by the Healers that leaves no scar.

A whirring sound began, its source unseen. A bulbous protrusion at the bottom of the sphere, located between the extended legs, began to glow. Bright whitish lines appeared, encircling the sphere in two rows. Their glow became stronger from moment to moment, then they changed color, the upper row emitting a red hue and the lower a bluish one. Two portholes, like big eyes, were opened in the upper part of the sphere. And, as the priests scurried away, Ishtar's globelike skyship rose off its platform. It hovered a few moments as its extended legs retracted and disappeared into the sphere. And then the skyship, airborne, was aloft and away.

* * *

No sooner had Ishtar left the courtyard than the High Priest began to repeat to the other priests Ishtar's words of promise to make him king instead of Gilgamesh. The news swept the Sacred Precinct like a brush fire in the midst of summer, first whispered, then told aloud, then shouted from priest to priest on the ramparts. Soon it seemed that the whole precinct was shouting, "Enkullab shall be crowned king!"

The shouts reached Ninsun on her perch. First the ominous news was heard from one direction then from another, "Enkullab shall be crowned king! Enkullab shall be crowned king!"

She looked down, surveying the Sacred Precinct. She could not see Ishtar; she could not see any of the other gods. All she could

see were priests in their varied robes, scurrying about like loathsome rodents, about to devour her in the service of their evil chief.

She looked around her. With the absence of the large assemblage that had been gathered the day before, the place looked more awesome in its silence. The White Temple, without its attending priests and their fear-inspiring costumes, was majestic in its serenity. The wind whistled as its drafts were caught in the temples' many apertures. When Ninsun closed her eyes she imagined she heard a divine melody, like the whistles of the Tablets of Destinies when disc communicated with disc.

No one entered the White Temple unless it was so required during the rites. But now, all alone on the hallowed ground where her grandfather, the Lord Anu, had given his blessing to Earth and its people, Ninsun felt invited . . .

She entered the temple through the doorway behind the sacred tree. Through the ceiling apertures, rays of sunlight threw odd patterns on the floor and walls. Passing between two external chambers she reached the large, elongated front hall. Toward its western end there stood the seat of Anu, a thronelike structure of stone. Ninsun walked toward it and, reaching the throne, fell to her knees and bowed three times. Then, as she stood up, she touched the stone seat with her hand. The thought that a thousand Earth-years earlier the great Lord Anu had actually sat on this throne made her feel a warmth emanating from it, an inner radiation.

The throne acted as a divider, separating the two-thirds of the elongated hall in front of it from the third behind it. The posterior section formed a perfect square, flanked by chambers and cellas. An opening in the farthest wall led to stairs that reached the roof of the temple, to a spot provided for stellar observations. To the right of her, Ninsun could see the Sacred Veil, made of unique material and hanging from the ceiling all the way down to the floor, completely covering the opening to the Holy of Holies. It was a chamber that had no ceiling and was open to the sky, except that it had as a roofing a layer of ram skins that were spread out as a canopy upon long wooden logs.

Only the High Priest was allowed, once a year, to enter this inner sanctum. There, tradition held, the sole object present was a wood-and-gold chest, which had been placed there at the time of Anu's visit. It was the Divine Speaker, the source of the enigmatic oracle that was heard by the High Priest on the day of the Fixing of the Destinies. This was the place that the High Priest could enter and come out alive, for he alone could wear the breastplate with the heavenly stones that gave protection. And now Ninsun stood there, separated from the Divine Speaker by a mysterious veil. *Should she break the taboo and enter to lay her plea before the Lord of Lords,* she asked herself, *and face unknown consequences or face what surely would happen to her son if she did not?*

Summoning all her courage Ninsun pushed the veil aside. Her hand trembled. There was utter darkness inside. She took one step, then another, into the inner sanctum. Up ahead a glow appeared. Though faint it was enough to enable her to see the sacred chest, standing on a litter, its ancient carriers long gone.

Ninsun fell to her knees and bowed three times. Then she approached the chest. Two curving protrusions arose from its sides like winged horns; the wings came together, almost tip to tip but without touching, above the chest. The glow's source was the space between the wings' tips. Ninsun knelt down before the chest, waiting for something to happen—for a bolt to strike her down, or to hear Anu's words—but there was utter silence. She covered her face with her hands, her feelings welling up. She had entered the Holy of Holies and was still alive! And that, she felt, was a sign that her prayer would be accepted.

She stretched out her hands, and in a firm voice, uttered her prayer:

"Great Anu, Lord of Heaven and all that is on Earth,
Hear the prayer of thine offspring,
A mother in distress!
It is for my son that I pray unto thee
About the king, the valiant Gilgamesh,
Two-thirds of him divine.

Oh Anu, great lord, master of all!
Why, having granted me Gilgamesh for a son,
With a restless heart didst thou endow him?
Seeking Life, a far journey he had undertaken,
To Utu, lord of the Eagles, his course he has set;
to travel an uncertain road, to seek thy lofty gate!
Guard him on his journey, oh forebear of mine;
Banish evil from his way, Lord of Lords;
Grant him Life, and a safe return!"

Having finished her prayer, Ninsun fell silent; there was total silence all around her. *Had her prayer been heard, conveyed over the myriad leagues to Anu's celestial abode? Would he accept her supplication? Would he respond?*

She remained kneeling for a while, overcome by emotion; there were tears in her eyes. She got up and wiped the tears with the hem of her garment and walked backward while bowing repeatedly. As she reached the veil and passed through it, the glow above the chest seemed to have gone out. She had spoken to Anu and had not been struck down!

Encouraged, Ninsun was ready to face the storm of Ishtar. She went back into the larger part of the temple and sat down on the throne of Anu. The die was cast! The fates were challenged!

No sooner had Ninsun seated herself so than Ishtar arrived outside in her skyship. In a graceful swoop, the aircraft came to a landing on the large platform.

As the skyship hovered downward, the globe's three legs were extended. The bulbous protrusion began to lose its reddish radiance. As soon as the aircraft touched down, the hatch opened and the stairs arched down. Ishtar, her garb tight on her body and the pilot's helmet covering her head, rushed down the stairs. She was holding in her hand a short thick stick, the awesome Weapon of Brilliance.

The podium from where Ninsun had spoken her provoking words was empty. Swiftly Ishtar looked about the platform, but Ninsun was not to be seen. Had she rushed down off the mound, Ishtar wondered, when she saw the skyship coming? Ishtar rushed to the

top of the processional stairway and looked down. There were priests gathered at its foot. Ishtar shouted to them, inquiring; they shouted back that they had not seen Ninsun.

Ishtar then remembered that the mound had a narrow back stairway, existing from a time before the monumental stairway was built. She rushed there. A lone priest, oblivious to what was going on, was coming up the stairs.

“Have you seen the Lady Ninsun?” Ishtar shouted to him.

Confused by the sudden encounter with the great goddess, he did not answer. Instead, he turned and started to run down the stairs.

Furious, Ishtar pointed her weapon at him. There was a bright flash and in an instant the priest was gone, vaporized without a trace.

Did Ninsun go into the temple? Ishtar wondered. Holding up her weapon, Ishtar rushed to the temple’s entrance. She was almost running when she entered, but stopped short once inside, awed by the starkness of the place, the silence, the darkness all around except where the sun’s rays cut bright swaths through the high apertures.

Ninsun saw Ishtar silhouetted against the entrance’s brightness. She also saw that Ishtar held her weapon ominously in her right hand. Now Ishtar stepped in, taking cautious steps forward, casting looks around. She advanced slowly until she had reached a sunlit spot. It was then that Ninsun spoke up.

“I have been waiting for you, great lady, Mistress of Erech!” she said. Her words, spoken calmly, reverberated in the empty temple.

The suddenness with which the words were spoken startled Ishtar. She froze her stride, and her armed hand jerked forward. Her eyes, not yet used to the dimness inside the temple, could not discern the whereabouts of the speaker. Then, just as suddenly, she realized that it was Ninsun who had spoken and that she was right there, seated on the sacred throne.

For a moment Ishtar was speechless. Then, her fury returned. She pointed the weapon at Ninsun and shouted, “You have defiled the sacred seat of Anu! For this you shall die!”

Ninsun stood up. “I am under the wing of Anu, our great father,” she announced. “Do me harm, and surely it shall be you who shall be buried alive!”

“No, it is you who shall be hung from a stake, for your treason!” Ishtar shouted back. “I am wise to your schemes, daughter of Ninharsag! To replace me as Mistress of Erech is your aim!”

“The accusation is as baseless as it is curious,” Ninsun retorted. “I am one of the Healers, with no desire to lord over a city.”

“Is that so? Have I forgotten how it was when the new city was to be granted to a grandchild of the Olden Gods? Enki claimed it for his grandson Nabu, Enlil designated me, and your mother—ah, so peace-loving, so clever—said, ‘For the sake of peace, let my daughter Ninsun have it’!”

“The decision was made and Erech was granted to the House of Enlil,” Ninsun said.

“Yet there are those who still uphold the claim for Marduk’s firstborn, Nabu!” Ishtar told her.

“Marduk is anathema to all of us who are of Enlil’s house,” Ninsun shot back.

“Yes, yes,” Ishtar said, sarcasm in her voice. “But *are you,* daughter of Ninharsag, of the House of Enlil? Or did the old fox Enki father you? The tales of your mother’s wooing by the competing brothers are no secret!”

“These are evil words spread by wagging tongues!” Ninsun shouted. “Seeking a legal heir by their half-sister, the two brothers had indeed vied for her love . . . but whichever way you twist it, a granddaughter of the Lord of Lords, Anu, am I!”

“And Marduk is his grandson . . . your half-brother, if the gossip is right!”

“I will not betray my mother’s secret to please you,” Ninsun said. “But you can harm neither me nor my son.”

“Yes, by your ancestry from my weapon you are protected,” Ishtar replied, lowering her weapon. “But the Seven Who Judge can order your punishment . . . and the charge will be treason!”

“The charge, I repeat, is baseless,” Ninsun answered back, and she stepped down toward Ishtar. “My mother has no vengeance in her heart toward you, for like the other olden ones, she awaits her turn to go back home. As for me, healing is my avocation. As Mistress of Erech, I acknowledge you, great lady.”

With these words, Ninsun came closer to Ishtar. She bowed her head, then held out her hand to touch Ishtar’s shoulder. Ishtar stepped back to avoid the contact.

“Soothing words, but only words,” Ishtar said. “For, do tell me, where is your noble son and what are *his* evil schemes?” She waved her weapon menacingly. “Be warned, if an offender he is, by my own hand he shall die!”

“Becalm yourself,” Ninsun said, watching the Weapon of Brilliance that Ishtar was waving. “My son Gilgamesh, king of Erech by your grace, is neither schemer nor offender. In search of Everlife he has gone, for you ignored his pleas, even held back his due blessing!”

Ishtar lowered her weapon. “True,” she said. “While he was pleading for life, the joy of lovemaking only was I seeking. But life I myself have been seeking, requesting of Anu to take me aloft ahead of my turn. The curse of Earth is upon me, making me age faster than the others. . . .” Her voice trailed off and there was momentary silence.

“I share the same fate,” Ninsun said softly, “having also been born on this planet.”

“But to parents who had come from Nibiru!” Ishtar retorted, her anger resumed. “Mine, themselves children of this Earth are. My aging is twice removed from the longevity of Nibiru!”

“Your brother Utu, your twin though he is, and commander of the Eagles, has declared that to Earth and its people he shall remain loyal, to their welfare will he dedicate his life,” Ninsun said.

“What has my brother got to do with the affairs of Erech?”

“It was to Utu, to seek his blessing, that I urged Gilgamesh to go.”

“In search of Everlife . . . of immortality?”

“Indeed. That Utu might direct him to the Cedar Mountain, to the Landing Place. That is the journey Gilgamesh has undertaken.”

“The fool!” Ishtar cried out. “The place is guarded by fearsome Huwawa, the siege engine that Enlil installed. No mortal can enter the Cedar Forest and live! I will send word to Utu to suppress this misadventure!”

“No!” Ninsun said. “The die is cast, from fate there is no return!”

“You have sent Gilgamesh on a journey of no return,” Ishtar said. “Instead of life, death he shall encounter!”

Ninsun looked at Ishtar inquisitively. “You love him after all,” she murmured.

“But not if he had conspired against me!”

Ninsun put her hand on Ishtar’s shoulder, and Ishtar did not reject the gesture.

“Gilgamesh has espoused you by the Sacred Marriage,” Ninsun said. “The investiture has taken place. The kingship must be his to keep for this one year! Let no one else ascend his throne until the year is ended, or his limp body to Erech shall be returned.” She pulled back her hand and bowed her head.

“So be it,” Ishtar said. “To that which he is fated, let Gilgamesh journey. . . . I shall neither stop him or urge him on. But from the heights, from my skyship, his trail I shall find and his happenings I shall observe.”

The goddesses clasped their arms to seal their compact. Then Ishtar turned and left the way she had come in, silhouetted against the daylight outside. Ninsun followed her in time to see Ishtar take off in her silvery skyship.

* * *

In the priestly wing of the Great Temple, the priestly hierarchy was gathered, awaiting the return of the High Priest from his unscheduled audience with Ishtar.

This very morning they had been in a jubilant mood, brought on by the celestial omen, the disappearance of the king, and Ishtar’s announced intention to choose Enkullab as the king’s successor, thereby reuniting again the priesthood with the kingship. Now their mood was somber, for after her encounter with Ninsun at the White

Temple, Ishtar had informed the visiting gods that they need not stay. She then summoned the High Priest to an urgent audience.

The eleven chief priests, each the head of a division of the priestly establishment responsible for certain duties in the Sacred Precinct, were still speculating about the meaning of the latest developments when the High Priest walked into the assembly hall. His fallen face bespoke ill. He took his seat at the head of the group and surveyed the gathered hierarchy.

“The goddess has changed her mind,” he finally said. “The kingship shall remain vested in Gilgamesh for the duration of the year . . . unless he is found dead earlier.”

The stunned silence that followed was broken by a babble of angry comments. Enkullab raised his hand for silence. “One at a time,” he told them, “and please speak to the point.”

“Where *is* Gilgamesh?” one of the chief priests asked.

“Of that I was not informed,” Enkullab answered. “All I was told was that Ishtar had given her word to the Lady Ninsun to consider the absent Gilgamesh king for the year’s duration unless his death is established earlier.”

“That sounds as though the goddesses themselves know not his whereabouts,” another chief priest said.

“Whatever it might mean, it is most humiliating,” Enkullab said. “I was led to believe I would be crowned king on the morrow. The gods were told to stay. I even sent urgent word to the Elders, to be ready . . . and now, I stand empty-handed, looking foolish, disgraced!”

“We have all been disgraced,” one of the others said.

“We are talking like young lads whose advances have been rejected,” another one said, “instead of concentrating on the problem. We must know what happened to Gilgamesh. Has Niglugal told the truth? Perhaps the king is hiding in the palace, ill in body or confused in mind because he touched Anu’s handiwork?”

“My masters, I have an answer,” said a younger priest who had just walked in.

They stared at him. “Speak,” Enkullab told him.

“I am Meshga, of the priests that perform the rites of penance. There came, just a while ago, a young woman unto me in the courtyard of altars, seeking forgiveness, for she could offer only a pigeon as sacrifice when an ewe was required to atone for a serious sin. When I questioned her what the great sin was, she mumbled words about having been sworn, against her will, to keep an evil secret concerning the king.”

“Go on,” the High Priest said.

“I told her no forgiveness was possible unless she spoke out the whole truth of the matter. So she told me that she was one of the joy girls in a brothel that Enkidu, the king’s comrade, and sometimes the king himself, have been frequenting. That last night, as she was asleep with Enkidu, the king appeared and, awaking Enkidu, huddled with him. Then the two discarded their clothing and put on shabby clothes and took provisions with them. And they were directed by her mistress to the boat of a merchant named Adadel, who was readying to sail after sunrise. After the two men, the king and Enkidu, had left, the mistress swore her and another of the harlots to keep the whole affair a secret.”

“That is all she said?” Enkullab asked.

“No, great master,” the priest continued. “Later on, in mid-morning, the king’s soldiers came. And they took with them the mistress of the house, Salgigti by name, and threatened all the young women to be silent about it. And the girl knew that some evil was being committed, that her oath was a sin. So she rushed to the temple to seek penance.”

“And did she know where the boat was sailing to?”

“To Mari. That is what its owner, Adadel by name, was telling the harlots when he had their company.”

“If the king’s men had come to the House of Joy seeking answers of its mistress, it means that Gilgamesh is not in the palace,” one of the chief priests said. “He must have done what he and Enkidu had schemed, sailed away on Adadel’s boat.”

“Why would he go to Mari, and so suddenly?” another chief priest wondered.

“Chief of the guard-priests,” Enkullab said turning to him. “That is your task, to find out.”

“So we will,” the chief of the guard-priests said. “But if that is what happened, then Gilgamesh is alive and well and will not be replaced on the throne!”

Enkullab stared at him. “I hear more than disappointment in your words,” he said. “If Gilgamesh has sailed off,” Enkullab continued, “he is no longer within reach of our spears. Go, find out what you can, and we shall meet again to discuss the matter of our humiliation.”

* * *

It was later that afternoon, after it had been established that Adadel’s boat had sailed off in the morning with two strangers aboard, and the two regular sailors had been found unconscious on the quay, that Enkullab had an unexpected visitor in his private quarters.

He was alone in his bedchamber, distraught and angry, when he noticed movement behind the curtain that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the chamber.

“Who is it? Reveal yourself!” the High Priest cried out, alarmed.

A man in priestly garb stepped forward. “I am Anubani, in charge of the grainhouse,” he said.

Enkullab recognized him. Not of the top hierarchy yet of some importance, this priest had in the past tried to bring himself to the High Priest’s attention by uttering a word here and there that got Enkullab’s attention. When Enkullab had inquired, he was told that Anubani was especially adept in dealing with the merchants who kept Erech and its temples in ample supplies of victuals.

“Why have you come here, uninvited, like a thief?” Enkullab demanded to know.

“A word with you, my master,” Anubani answered in a low voice. “A secret.”

“A secret? I am too distraught for petty matters. Speak to the chief of the storehouses.”

“It is about the king, Gilgamesh.”

“He has sailed off, gone beyond reaching,” Enkullab replied.

“But he *is* within reach, if the master shall listen.”

“He’s gone a full day of sailing. No man, with neither beast nor boat, can catch up with him.”

“No man indeed . . . but the gods can!”

Enkullab stared at him. “Say your words, your secret!”

“A skyboat,” Anubani replied. “A skyboat can catch up with him and assure his demise!”

“A skyboat!” Enkullab said, laughing. “Only the gods have them, and Ishtar has made a compact with the Lady Ninsun to await the course of a year!”

“Indeed so,” Anubani told him, looking shiftily about. “You cannot find succor in Erech. But in the dominions of the Lord Marduk—ah, that would be another matter!”

“How dare you utter the name of our lady’s adversary, he who had caused the death of her spouse in her own sacred temple!” Enkullab shouted.

“My master,” Anubani said bowing his head. “The Lord Marduk, following olden customs, the kingship with the priesthood in your hands shall combine.”

“And how do you come by all this knowledge?”

“Master, most High Priest,” Anubani said. “A secret emissary of the Lord Marduk am I, a worshipper of the great Lord Enki.”

Enkullab eyed him. “You can be executed for this,” he said.

Anubani bent his head down and spread his hands in a gesture of submission.

“Speak, I will hear you out,” Enkullab responded.

“A boat that sails up the Euphrates undertakes a risky journey,” Anubani said. “For three days the wilderness encroaches upon the river’s banks, a long stretch open to the desert’s marauders. Then, when a habitat is reached, it is Borsippa, a city dedicated to the Lord Nabu . . .”

“A thorn in the side of the Enlilites,” Enkullab interjected.

“A welcome thorn in this case . . . for to the south of Erech, reachable by a fast ass-rider on the day after tomorrow, there lies Eridu, domain of the Lord Enki.”

“Go on.”

“Once the message is brought to Eridu, Marduk’s skyships can soar up. The boat could be intercepted, word could be passed to Borsippa. Who can foretell what fate awaits a fugitive?” Anubani raised his eyes. “Many have vanished before on such risky journeys . . .”

There was silence for a while.

“An interesting possibility,” Enkullab finally said. “But why should help come from Marduk?”

“To put right a wrong. To Ishtar, the distant land of Aratta was intended, not the city of Erech. But she laid herself before the Lord Anu, bared her breasts, seduced him. Erech for Nabu, Marduk’s son, was intended!”

“I see,” Enkullab said. “Removing Gilgamesh is a step in removing Ishtar.”

“You are a priest of the Lord Anu, sworn to uphold righteousness. Gilgamesh is a sinner, a violator of brides. It is the omen from Anu that should guide you!” Anubani paused, eying the High Priest. “The Lord Marduk, as I said, shall put the kingship in your hands.”

“And the price?” Enkullab demanded.

“Just a message, a message from you to the city of Eridu,” Anubani replied. From inside his garment he brought out a clay tablet, wrapped in wet cloth to keep its freshness. “It is all written here,” he said as he handed the tablet to Enkullab. “The tale of Gilgamesh and his sins, your rights to the succession, and an appeal to the gods to intervene.”

Enkullab took the tablet. Moving closer to the torch so that he could better see, he read the inscription. The tablet’s clay still felt wet. “Yes,” he said. “It is all here, and true.”

“Seal it with your seal and to Eridu it shall return,” Anubani replied.

Enkullab studied his visitor. “How do I know that you are who you say?”

“A worthy question,” Anubani said. From an inside pocket of his garment he brought out a small leather pouch, and from it he took out a cylinder seal. He rolled it on the back of the tablet. The impression showed the god Marduk holding his emblem—the ram-headed staff—and the emblem of Earth—the seven dots—in front of him. Inscribed were the words “Anubani, servant of divine Marduk, the Rightful Successor.”

“Fate has no distinction,” Enkullab said pensively. “Even among the gods, a right for one is a wrong for the other.”

“Seal the tablet with your signet seal, and the kingship in Erech will be yours!”

“So be it,” Enkullab said. He reached for the seal that hung from a leather string around his neck and rolled it upon the face of the tablet.

“I have put my fate in the hands of your gods,” he said as he handed the tablet back to Anubani, “that they support me in my rightful claims.”

“So it shall be, Priest of Priests,” Anubani said, and bowed.

8

Adadel's boat, sailing northward up the great Euphrates River, made good progress that very first morning after it had left Erech.

The brisk wind continued for several double-hours, and the sailors, fresh after the forced rest during the days of the New Year festival, rowed with vigor and enthusiasm at the thought of going home. The two newcomers on board, Enkidu and Gilgamesh, were the focus of attention for a while but, having done their fair share of rowing, were soon accepted as part and parcel of the crew. Adadel, the merchant-captain, however, continued to throw inquisitive glances at them, his suspicions unabated. But then after midday the wind died down and the rowers got tired, and Adadel's attention was diverted to problems as the boat neared a narrower strip of the river and the waterway had to be shared with other boats.

By evetime they reached a stretch of the river that was so wide it seemed to be a great lake, not a river. Adadel, though swearing profusely, was not dissatisfied. The crew had done well, and it was time to let them rest and eat—once the anchorage spot for the night had been decided upon. Tying up at the river's bank would expose the boat to the risk of nighttime marauders; anchoring in midriver risked a collision with other boats passing in the darkness.

"The river traffic is heavy this time," the crewmaster said. "Shall we tie up at the bank?"

"No," Adadel said. "In midriver." He nodded at the direction of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. "In case we have to get rid of them . . ."

After they had chosen a suitable spot, Adadel let the crew off for the night. Some jumped into the fresh water to swim. Gilgamesh, tired by the long hours of rowing, found a place among the bales of skins and large earthenware jars containing grains and fell fast asleep. Enkidu, not at all tired, kept a sharp eye on the goings-on. Then, as the others turned in for the night, he came to lie beside

Gilgamesh. To his dismay, he saw that there was no room for him, for other crewmen were sprawled beside the king, surrounding him with their bodies. The best he could do was find an available spot nearby where he could sit up, his back leaning against one of the jars. For a time he sat with his eyes half-closed, keeping watch over his comrade. The nighttime tranquillity was occasionally broken by shouts from other boats as they passed by. Otherwise, all was peaceful. And as the hours passed, Enkidu dozed off.

He awoke with a start, realizing that his hands were being pulled back and tied with rope. He was thrown to the floor, held down by several crewmen, their daggers pointed at his throat. He could see that Gilgamesh had also been seized.

Adadel was standing between the two of them, supervising the attack. He was holding a dagger in one hand and a whip in the other. He pointed at Enkidu. “Search him!” he commanded.

They quickly found the hidden pouch with the silver shekels.

“Who are you?” Adadel shouted at Enkidu. “Who is your companion?”

And when Enkidu did not answer, Adadel hit him with the whip, again and again. “Search the big one!” he ordered.

Flexing his muscles, Enkidu snapped the ropes tying his hands and shoved his captors aside. He lunged at Adadel, and Adadel thrust the dagger at him, cutting Enkidu’s arm. Enkidu struck Adadel, throwing him to the floor. A crewman who was holding Gilgamesh came at him with his dagger, and Enkidu lifted him, and in one arching motion threw him overboard.

“Stay clear of us or I will throw you *all* overboard!” Enkidu shouted.

Cowed by his unexpected strength, they stayed back. With one pull, Enkidu tore off the ropes with which Gilgamesh was tied up.

Gilgamesh stood up. “Why did you attack us?” he asked.

“We meant no harm,” Adadel said. “If we did, we could have just killed you. But you are obviously no ordinary sailors. So, we were curious.”

“So you were,” Gilgamesh said. “It is common nature to be curious. Have you found out enough, or do you wish for more?”

“Let us continue the voyage in peace,” Adadel answered. He raised his right hand, its palm facing Gilgamesh.

“So be it,” Gilgamesh said. He lifted his right hand and clapped it against Adadel’s.

“By what names are you known?” Adadel asked him.

“I am Kiagda, and my companion’s name is Ursag,” Gilgamesh said. “In our tongue they mean ‘offspring of Kiag’ and ‘hero.’”

“And my name is Adadel,” the captain said, “meaning ‘Adad is my God.’ . . . Now, let us all get our night’s rest, for dawn and the rowing will soon return.” He left them and went back to his perch where the crewmaster was waiting.

“Have you seen it?” Adadel whispered to him. “I’ve cut the short one’s arm with my dagger but he wasn’t even bleeding!”

“As you said, master, they are no ordinary sailors, these two,” the crewmaster replied. “We will have to find other ways of discovering who they are and why they’ve joined us.”

* * *

Apart from the challenges and hazards of sailing the river—a near-collision with another boat, a gust of wind that toppled the sail’s mast, an oar caught in a clump of reeds and weeds, freshly caught fish snatched away by ravens—the journey was uneventful on the second day of sailing. The rowers’ singing, loud and long the first day, was now more sporadic and everyone was hopeful that the repaired sail would do the rowers’ work. Gilgamesh and Enkidu were left alone with only the captain speaking briefly to them. There was still general puzzlement why the cut in the arm of Enkidu—the one now known as Ursag—neither bled nor needed tending, but no one spoke of this out loud.

The second night they threw anchor and tied up at the river’s eastern bank, standing watch in turns, but the night passed peacefully.

On the third day of sailing, in late afternoon, there were odd happenings in the skies. Clouds gave way to sunshine and then returned, casting a gloomy grayness on the river and its travelers. Then, from the south, there appeared in the skies dark dots that

seemed to dart to and fro, growing larger in size as they neared. All aboard the boat stopped doing their chores, watching instead with astonishment the unusual celestial sight. Then the dark dots separated and one of them dived down soundlessly toward the river, almost touching the watery surface.

“It’s a skyship of the gods!” Gilgamesh cried out.

The object rose slightly as it whooshed over the boat and, rising in a graceful arch, joined the two other dark dots in the clouds. For a moment the three dots were out of sight. Then they reappeared, and arranging themselves in a lineal formation, came down to follow the river’s course. Now it could be seen that all three were godly skyships. When they reached Adadel’s boat, they seemed to halt and hover for a while. Then, rising almost vertically, they disappeared from sight.

“It’s an omen from the gods!” the crewmaster shouted and prostrated himself on the boat’s floor. The other crewmen did likewise.

“I’ve heard of the skyships but have never seen one before!” Adadel exclaimed. “It’s indeed an omen, whose meaning we must learn before events overtake us. Get up and start rowing! Borsippa, the city of the Lord Nabu, lies ahead. We shall stop there and make offerings at its temples!”

Gilgamesh grabbed Enkidu’s arm, a concerned look on his face.

“I read your thoughts, my comrade,” Enkidu said. “The skyships, black in color, are of Enki’s camp, of Marduk and Nabu.”

“We must reach Sippar,” Gilgamesh said.

“And we must not anchor at Borsippa, our enemy’s nest,” Enkidu replied.

While some of the crewmen resumed rowing, others were trying, under the crewmaster’s supervision, to repair the broken mast and hoist the sail again. Enkidu offered to hold the mast’s broken parts together while the others used ropes to reconnect the parts. But again and again the thick logs slipped out of Enkidu’s hands, tearing the ropes that held them together. After several tries, the crewmaster gave up.

“We’ll just have to row our way upriver,” he said.

But the rowing was not advancing them much, for the weather became stormier and the cold wind churned waves that made going against the current very difficult. At day’s end the cloudy skies made darkness fall sooner.

“We’d better stop for the night and find a safe haven along the river’s bank,” the crewmaster said.

“Yes, there’s no chance of reaching Borsippa before nightfall,” Adadel agreed. “But during the day I’ve seen caravans along the eastern bank, and groups of ass-riders too. Who knows what mischief they might harbor? We’ll anchor in midriver again.”

“What about the eastern bank, where the dryness begins?” the crewmaster asked.

“It could be worse. Haven’t you heard of the Shagaz, the marauders who ride a funny-looking, long-legged animal with a hump on its back?”

They dropped anchor in the middle of the river.

It was a dark night, for thick clouds hid the full moon, yet it was uneventful. With the relative safety of daybreak near, even those on the last watch lay down and fell asleep. All was still silent as the first light began to awaken some on the boat, which was when it was discovered that somehow the boat had broken from its anchor and was drifting toward the western shore.

Awakened, Adadel checked the anchor’s ropes. They had not torn —they had been cut!

As Adadel sounded an alarm to awaken all onboard, there was a loud shout and strangers who were in the water hiding behind the boat’s stern climbed aboard, and a general struggle broke out.

By now the boat had hit the sandy bank of the river, and from behind the sand dunes of the western bank other attackers rushed the boat. Though armed to the teeth with daggers and swords, and outnumbering the boat’s crew, it soon became evident that they were not out to kill anyone, rather to seize captives alive.

In the bedlam, the oil lamp that provided the constant fire overturned and a fire began to spread on the boat.

“Quick, into the water!” Enkidu shouted to Gilgamesh, knocking off two marauders who were overwhelming the king.

Without waiting for Gilgamesh to respond, Enkidu grabbed him and jumped with him into the river. With powerful strokes he distanced the two of them from the boat, swimming underwater to avoid detection. Though he himself needed no air, he held up the king’s head now and then so that Gilgamesh could breathe. Then he himself took a look. They were a good distance away from the burning boat. The shouts that could still be heard were now coming —not from the boat—but from the river’s bank. Looking about him in the river, Enkidu saw a growth of reeds sticking out of the water. Holding firmly on to Gilgamesh, with his free hand Enkidu steered himself in that direction. Reaching the clump of reeds, Enkidu saw that it was a sandbar, a tiny island rising in the midst of the river. He swam to its far side and pulled Gilgamesh out of the water, helping him lie down, exhausted, among the reeds, while he himself swam back to the island’s front, keeping only his head above the water.

From this hiding place, Enkidu could see the boat’s captives. Their hands were tied and they were being led away. The marauders were frantically offloading the boat’s cargo, racing the burning fire, loading what they could salvage on to camels that were led to the river’s bank from behind the sandhills. There were shouts in a language that Enkidu did not recognize, and he saw the boat’s master, Adadel, being brought back to the river’s bank. Someone who was apparently in command was shouting, pointing to the boat, slapping Adadel’s face. Some of the marauders spread along the river’s bank, searching.

Enkidu swam behind the sandbar and immersed himself completely in the water.

When he put his head out after some time, all was quiet. The marauders and their captives were gone. He returned to Gilgamesh to relay the goings-on.

“What happened?” Gilgamesh, recovered, asked.

“Shagaz,” Enkidu said. “They usually kill everyone and take no captives, for as wanderers they have no use of slaves. They are only after the booty. But this time they wanted everyone alive.”

“Why?”

“A good question. Perhaps we’ll find the answer in the boat.”

They waited a little longer to make sure there was no one there, then swam back to the boat. It lay half-sunk in the water, badly damaged by the fire. Broken earthenware jars lay about; whatever jar or bale of cargo was intact had been carried off by the marauders.

Diving into the clear waters, Enkidu found undamaged waterskins, a pouch filled with wet flour, and the remains of the lamb’s carcass that had been slaughtered and roasted the day before; there was some meat left on the bones. He hauled his finds out of the water. Onboard, among the debris, he found several daggers—whether the attackers’ or the crews’, he could not say.

“We have food and we have weapons,” Enkidu said. “Let’s find a hidden spot where you can eat and rest. Then we’ll decide on the course to be taken.”

They walked along the river’s bank. The sun was now quite strong, and Gilgamesh held up his hand to shield his eyes. Birds of prey were circling in the skies, issuing repulsive cries. There was a shaded spot among the sandhills flanking the river, and they stopped there.

“I’m hungry,” Gilgamesh said.

“I have a king’s feast ready,” Enkidu replied. He opened the package that he had made of a piece of the torn sail and spread its contents before Gilgamesh. “All I need is water,” Enkidu said. “You eat the food.” He held up the carcass. “Some of the meat is still good.”

Before he could complete the sentence, one of the birds of prey, a giant eagle perhaps, swooped down toward them and grabbed the carcass.

Agile beyond belief, Enkidu jumped high into the air, catching the carcass.

For a moment the huge bird was flying away, holding on to the carcass and carrying Enkidu with it. Then Ekidu let out a terrible

scream and the bird let go of its prey. Enkidu, the carcass in his hands, fell to the ground with a loud thump.

Gilgamesh ran to where Enkidu had fallen. He knew that a man could not survive such a crushing fall. But as he reached the spot, he saw Enkidu sitting, holding up the carcass, and when Enkidu saw the frightened look on the king's face, he burst out in a roaring laughter.

And for the first time since the night of the Sacred Marriage, Gilgamesh also burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Now you shall have your feast," Enkidu said. He took wet flour from the pouch and, shaping it into thin round cakes, spread the dough upon a rock. "The sun will be our oven," he told the king. While the barley cakes were baking, he went down to the river and washed the carcass well. Then he spread the meat, bread, and a waterskin on the torn piece of the sail. "There you are," he said, pleased with himself.

"Well now," Gilgamesh said as he satisfied his hunger. "Shall we swim across the river and join a caravan or find a village for a night's rest?"

"We are too close to Borsippa," Enkidu answered, "and I don't like the look of things. . . . The Shagaz behaved oddly, and their attack followed the black skyships. That is the color of Marduk's and Nabu's skyships."

"So it was not Ishtar that was looking for me. What of it?"

"I smell a connection between the inspection of the boat by the skyships and the odd attack by the Shagaz," Enkidu said. "As nomads constantly on the go, they do not take prisoners. Yet this time that's all they were interested in. And you saw how they questioned Adadel and looked for someone still missing. They were after *us,* I tell you!"

"You make sense, but there's no logic to it," Gilgamesh said. "Why would the Lord Nabu of Borsippa look for us rather than Ishtar or Shamash?"

"I don't know. But I think it's too risky to cross over to the side where Borsippa's domain is. Let's continue on this desolate side for a day or two, until we face the domain of Sippar."

While Enkidu refilled the waterskins with water, Gilgamesh wrapped the rest of their meager belongings in the sail's cloth, and the two comrades began their trek northward.

At Enkidu's insistence, to be unseen from the river, they walked behind the sand dunes. But given the soft sand they walked in, Gilgamesh found the going tedious, and it was not even a double-hour before his sandals tore. Now the hot sand was burning his feet and he began to fall behind Enkidu. He called to Enkidu that they might rest, but Enkidu said that they should keep going.

In the afternoon, clouds began to darken the sky. Soon lightnings rent the Heavens and thunders shook the Earth. A rain followed, first light, then heavy. The two comrades sought shelter among some boulders. By the time the autumn storm had passed they were soaking wet and their meager belongings were all soggy. The wet sand became muddy, and as they resumed their trek, their feet sank deep with each step.

In spite of his concerns, Enkidu agreed that they try to walk along the river's bank, where the soil was harder and smoother. But even there Gilgamesh could hardly walk.

"I think my feet are bleeding," he said.

They sat down and Enkidu removed the wet sand from his comrade's feet. They were swollen, red, and bleeding. He helped Gilgamesh to the river and instructed him to soak his feet in the fresh, cooling water.

"It feels good," Gilgamesh said. "But I'm tired and sleepy."

"Let's go, then, to the sand dunes and rest there," Enkidu suggested.

They were hardly near the sand dunes when Enkidu suddenly grabbed Gilgamesh and threw him to the ground, then frantically began to cover the two of them with sand.

"What's the matter with you?" Gilgamesh shouted.

"There, the black skyships are back!" Enkidu said excitedly, pointing.

The skyships were clearly reconnoitering along the river, swooping down and back up time after time, progressing up the river as they

did so.

“Have they seen us?” Gilgamesh wondered.

“If not, they’ll be back, keeping up the search,” Enkidu said. “We must hurry on.”

“I don’t think I can,” Gilgamesh told him.

“I’ll carry you,” Enkidu said.

“Not before I call for help,” Gilgamesh replied. He removed the cord that was around his neck and showed Enkidu the stone that was attached to it. “It’s a Whispering Stone,” he explained, “a gift from my mother. I’m to use it if I really need help.”

He turned the green-black talisman upside down, then rubbed it between his hands. Holding it close to his mouth, he shouted, “Oh my mother! Our boat was attacked and burnt, our food is gone, we are lost in the wilderness. Help, oh mother, help!”

Enkidu grabbed the stone and rubbed it between his hands. “It is Enkidu, here with Gilgamesh, the king of Erech,” he shouted. “We are on the desolate side of the river, near Borsippa, marching toward Sippar. The dark-hued skyships are searching for us. We need help, soon, soon!”

He returned the stone to Gilgamesh. “Now that I’ve spoken to a stone,” he said, “it’s on my own prowess that I must rely.”

He helped Gilgamesh up and lifted him upon his shoulders.

“I’ll carry you as long as I can,” he said, “and may the good gods be with us.”

* * *

When darkness came that day, the two comrades found some boulders that could provide shelter. Exhausted, Gilgamesh was the first one to fall asleep, his head leaning on his comrade’s shoulder. Soon thereafter, Enkidu too fell asleep.

It was about midnight when sleep departed Gilgamesh. Awakening with a startle, he tugged at his comrade.

“Why did you wake me?” he asked Enkidu.

“How could I awaken you when I myself was asleep, just awakened *by you*?”

“If you didn’t arouse me, who did?” Gilgamesh asked. “I’m sure I heard my name being called.”

“It must have been a dream,” Enkidu said. “Go back to sleep.”

A double-hour or so later Gilgamesh awoke again. He shook Enkidu to arouse him.

“What is it this time?” Enkidu asked.

“Aside from my first dream, a second one I saw,” Gilgamesh told him. “In my second dream a boulder came toppling down. Then as it came to rest, it put out legs. A wind touched my face; my name was called!”

Listening to his comrade’s tale, Enkidu suddenly clamped his hand over his mouth.

“Hush!” he whispered to Gilgamesh. “Your vision was not a dream!”

He pointed to a large shape, barely distinguishable in the dark, resting on its extended legs some distance away near the river’s bank. The reddish glow that flared up periodically from a bulbous appendage between the legs revealed its identity as a skyship, a black-colored skyship.

Petrified, the two watched as one of the skyship’s eyes suddenly lit up. In a moment, a powerful beam of light began to sweep the ground all around. The two comrades cowered, pressing against the boulder and each other. But the sweeping beam found them. Its glare was overpowering, and the two raised their hands to cover their eyes, immobilized with fear.

The beam was dimmed but not extinguished. A hatch opened in the skyship. They could see, silhouetted against the light inside, the shape of a man, wearing tight-fitting garb but no helmet. Looking out toward them he raised his hand and gestured.

“Gilgamesh!” The king’s name was called out, but they could not be certain whether it came from the man they saw or if the calling had emanated from within the skyship.

Enkidu pressed his hand against his comrade’s mouth. “Don’t answer!” he said.

Now they could see a ladder beginning to extend from the open hatch, lowering itself toward the ground. As it touched down, a

second figure appeared at the hatch, and the two began to climb down.

Gilgamesh cluched Enkidu. “My end is near!” he whispered.

The two from the skyship, their hands extended as though they held weapons, began to walk toward the comrades’ hiding place. Enkidu pushed Gilgamesh behind him, placing himself in front, and braced himself for the inevitable encounter. Suddenly there materialized, as if out of nowhere, another skyship over the river. Its shape was not globe-like, like that of the other one. It was much larger and flatter, more like a dining plate, and it had neither sound nor lights. Only the moon’s rays emerging from behind the clouds revealed its presence. Then, all at once, many hued eyes lit up around the skyship’s circumference. As they began to rotate, a glaring beam shot out. It searched the ground until it came to rest upon the two crewmen of the black-hued skyship. The moment it touched them, the two stopped in their stride and stood motionless, like two lifeless statues.

Another beam, this time blue in color, now emanated from the large skyship. A voice that shook the ground boomed from the craft. “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, arise and step forward!”

Mesmerized by the sight, the two did not move. The booming voice called out again, thunderlike, earthshaking. A small boulder in the sand dune above them, loosened by the vibrations, toppled down in a slide of sand, half-burying the two comrades.

“Just as in my dream!” Gilgamesh whispered, shivering.

The blue beam moved closer to them and from it, in front of their incredulous eyes, a man materialized. He was wearing headgear similar to what Ishtar wore on her flights. His body was completely covered with a shiny silvery material. He took off his helmet as he neared them, and they could see that he had fair, golden-hued hair. He extended his hand to them.

“Come,” he said. “We are here to rescue you.”

“Who are you?” Enkidu dared ask, “and how do you know our names?”

“Fear not,” the Fair One answered. “The great Lord Utu, our commander, heard your cry for help. Come forward; step with me

into the blue beam."

He put his helmet back on and took hold of the two comrades, linking his arms with theirs. Thus held together, the three stepped into the beam. In an instant, Gilgamesh and Enkidu felt as though a giant hand was pulling them by the hair of their scalps. Up and up they were raised, into the source of the blue beam, sucked into the bowels of the great skyship.

They came to rest abruptly. The blue light was gone. Instead, a reddish light filled the chamber in which they had ended up. A door opened soundlessly in front of them and the Fair One, still holding them by the arms, led them through it to a corridor and then into a larger chamber, which was also bathed in a reddish light.

Another fair-haired man, older than the one who accompanied them, was sitting in a thronelike chair. It was neither of wood nor of stone or metal. To their great surprise, they saw that the throne could swivel, like a doorpost in its socket.

He raised his right hand to greet them.

"Welcome aboard, Gilgamesh, king of Erech, and Enkidu the valiant," he said. "We are glad we came to your rescue in time. I am Abgal, the commander."

"In the very nick of time," Enkidu said. "We are most grateful." He nudged Gilgamesh to speak up.

"Is this a Boat of Heaven?" Gilgamesh asked, looking about him.

"Indeed so," the commander replied.

"Praised be the Lord of Heaven!" Gilgamesh cried out, falling to his knees. "The omen has come true! I have been taken aloft, like Etana of Kish, like Adapa of Eridu!"

Abgal looked at them, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"The omen is being fulfilled!" Gilgamesh said, almost shouting. "Anu has sent his Boat of Heaven to take me to Nibiru! May the Lord of Lords be praised!"

"Gilgamesh," Abgal said, "this Boat of Heaven, as you have called it, is one that roams Earth's skies only. It is not a Gir that can soar beyond this planet. And it is not to the High Heavens that the Lord

Utu, our commander, has ordered us to take you, but to your destination, the Cedar Forest."

"But is not the Landing Place there?" Gilgamesh said.

"That is not for me to inform you," Abgal said. "You shall be healed and fed before we set you down in the Cedar Forest." He looked at the barefoot Gilgamesh. "And given new sandals," he added.

"Show us the boat's wonders!" Enkidu said.

"None but the Eagles that are assigned to it can see its workings," Abgal replied. He raised his right hand. "May the great lords be with you!"

The Fair One who had accompanied them took them again by the arms to lead them out.

"Is the Lord Utu aboard, that I may thank him?" Gilgamesh asked.

Abgal smiled. "I have indeed been told that you are of an inquiring and undaunted spirit, Gilgamesh. Your gratitude to the Lord Utu shall be conveyed."

"Come with me," the Fair One said, leading them to the exit.

"The box!" Abgal said suddenly.

Gilgamesh turned his head. "A parting gift?"

A crew member approached them. He held up a small box. Out of it shone a beam that was directed into the comrades' eyes. "Every recollection of what you have just seen is now erased," he told them.

9

It was always a thrill to see the Landing Place from the skies above. This time too Utu absorbed the grand view with a sense of pride and satisfaction; for here, nature and the Anunnaki had combined to create one of the most colorful sights on Earth.

On all sides, except ahead of them, the Earth was a yellow-brown. But then there always was the moment when the command ship, arriving from the east, could sight the two parallel mountain ranges rising skyward as a wall of green. And then, moments later, the Upper Sea could be seen beyond—a vast expanse of blue, touching the horizon. The sun's rays, somewhat reddish at this time of early morning, enhanced the colors that nature gave the wilderness, its cedar trees and the seawaters.

As the airship made a graceful arc to the south to begin the descent, a huge white field came into view amidst the green expanse. It was the Landing Place—the immense platform built of great paving stones that had withstood not only time but even the havoc of the Deluge!

"What a sight, what a place!" Utu said to the airship's commander.

"Indeed," Abgal agreed.

The airship now aligned itself on the south-north landing path between the two mountain ranges. The platform had been built on the inner slope of the eastern mountain range, its rectangular section stretching myriad paces from south to north. As the airship lowered itself for the touchdown, it passed on the right the podium that stood astride the landing field. It was a massive smaller platform resting on gigantic stone blocks set in rows in perfect fit with each other. A rocketship stood erect on it, supported by a crossbeamed structure, ready to be launched.

The airship glided past the podium toward the northern part of the landing platform. There it hovered in the air until it positioned itself

precisely above a circular marker. Then, extending its four legs, it landed.

There was obvious joy among the Eagles who had come up to the platform to greet their commander. The senior ones clasped arms with him, and he smiled broadly as he stepped with them into the shaft that took them down to the underground operations center and quarters.

“Any messages?” Utu asked, taking off his helmet.

“Two,” one of the senior officers said. “One from the Lady Ishtar. ‘Come I will, but to seek me you will,’ it said.”

“She hasn’t changed—always teasing, challenging,” Utu said. “And the other?”

“More ominous, from the Lord Nabu.”

“From the Lord Nabu himself? I want to hear it,” Utu told him.

They led him to the Dirga, the innermost communications center from which constant contact was maintained with the airborne skyships and with the spaceport and the mission control center. The vaulted chamber—bathed in a dim reddish light mixed with the amber glow emitted by the diverse equipment and filled with the hum of the whirring discs—always reminded Utu of the time that he, together with his twin sister, Ishtar, had been taken aloft to visit Anu’s spaceship.

As Utu entered the Dirga, the officer on duty called the Eagles who were manning the equipment to attention.

“Hail Lord Utu!” the Anunnaki, clad in body-hugging, silver-hued overalls, shouted in unison.

“At ease, at ease!” Utu said impatiently. “Let me hear the Lord Nabu’s message.”

In a moment, the glow from a whirring disc changed color, and the voice of Nabu broke the silence.

“To the great Lord Utu, illustrious son of the great Lord Sin, commander of the Eagles, greetings from the Lord Nabu, firstborn of the great Lord Marduk and lord of Borsippa! A skyship of yours has interfered with my patrols without provocation. There was trespass

into my father's territory. Explain these actions or the Great Council shall be summoned to be your judge."

The words came to an abrupt end and there was silence.

"What do you make of it, Uranshan?" Utu asked the base commander.

"We know what we have done, but the Lord Nabu doesn't know why we have done it. He knows why *they* tried to capture Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but *we* don't. He wants us to offer explanations, to extract from us what we know. That is what I make of it, my lord."

"Well-spoken," Utu said. "What we know so far is from intercepting the Lady Ninsun's prayer unto the great Lord Anu and then Gilgamesh's call for help. What the whole matter is about and why the Mardukites have intervened, we are yet to find out."

"Has it got to do, somehow, with tomorrow's launching?" Uranshan said. "Or perhaps . . ."

Utu stared at his comrade. "Come to my chamber," he said.

"What's on your mind, Uranshan?" Utu asked when they were alone.

"The black skyships," Uranshan said, "in a group of three were flying. They could not have come from the small landing pad in Borsippa. They had to come from a larger airbase."

"Such as Marduk's in the Shagaz lands?"

"Precisely . . . and if so, why would Marduk bother with a mortal's journey and put forth his son, Nabu, to challenge you with his message?"

"There's been talk among the great gods, Uranshan, that Marduk is pressing to change the terms of his banishment. He claims that he has been punished enough for the accidental death of Dumuzi. Now he insists on the right to pay periodic visits to the town of Babylon. I wonder whether that has to do with this accusation of trespass."

"Our command ship has the right to fly freely in this zone," Uranshan said.

"Indeed so . . . but not to thrust the paralyzing rays at the crew of the Mardukite skyships. Nabu's demand for an explanation must be

met, Uranshan . . . but not yet. Let's wait till the Lady Ishtar arrives. I have a feeling that a clue to the puzzles may be found in Erech."

* * *

It was daylight when the comrades awoke. They found themselves in a field strewn with rocks, in a hilly country. The Euphrates River and the sand dunes that flanked its bank were nowhere to be seen.

"Have we walked all night?" Gilgamesh asked, "escaping from the black skyship?"

Enkidu laughed. "You remember nothing?"

"Remember what?"

"Our rescuers," Enkidu said. "They shone a ray into our eyes to make us forget all that we had seen and heard aboard their airship, but mine is not a mortal's memory."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gilgamesh said. "All I remember is that awful skyship coming to get us on the river's bank. We must be some distance away from the river now."

"Indeed so. We are in the hill country, dropped off here by Utu's Eagles."

"I would remember some of it, exhausted as I was, if there were truth to your teasing," Gilgamesh said.

Look at your feet, then," Enkidu told him.

Gilgamesh did. Instead of his own sandals, he was wearing odd-shaped boots. The soles of the boots were flat only in front, unlike most other boots whose entire soles were usually flat for ease of walking. At the heel these boots were bulkier and the upper part, instead of featuring the usual leather strips, was solid and covered not just the foot, but also the lower part of the leg. From the boot's top there extended flaps, like the ears of an ass but shorter.

Gilgamesh bent and touched the silvery material of the boots. Though it looked metallic, it was soft and pliable, but it was neither leather nor cloth. He stared at Enkidu; he was wearing the same kind of boots.

"In god's name," Gilgamesh said, "what kind of footwear is this?"

"Jump!" Enkidu replied.

Gilgamesh, puzzled, followed his comrade's suggestion. Taking a few quick strides, he jumped, aiming to land a few cubits away. But unexpectedly he soared high, higher than he had ever jumped before, and landed hard many cubits farther. Disbelieving his own feat, he jumped again. Again he soared high and far, again landing hard then tumbling on his back.

Enkidu was roaring with laughter. With one big jump he was by his comrade's side, helping him up.

"These boots have magic," he said. "A gift of the Anunnaki of the Boat of Heaven."

"I know not what you're talking about," Gilgamesh said, annoyed.

"So be it," Enkidu said. "You were meant to forget all and you did. What I *can* say is that the Lord Utu intervened, having heard our call for help. We were brought to the vicinity of the Cedar Mountain and given these magical boots to help us reach your destination."

"*My* destination, as you put it, is the Landing Place. Now which way is it?"

"It lies to the west, of this I am certain. But whether we should make our way there, certain I am not," Enkidu told him. "It is hidden in the Cedar Forest, which extends for ten thousand leagues. Who is there to point out the entrance? And the entrance, my friend, by awesome Huwawa is guarded."

"Huwawa?"

"A monster! As a terror to mortals the Lord Enlil appointed him. His roaring is like the storm-flood, his mouth throws fire, his breath is a seizing death! Woe is there to him who challenges Huwawa. An unequal struggle it shall be, a certain death!"

Gilgamesh stood silently, casting his gaze upon the surrounding hills. He sighed and there were tears in his eyes. His right hand jerked awkwardly. "What is it?" Enkidu inquired.

"A reminder of sorts," Gilgamesh replied. He wiped his tears and turned to face Enkidu. "Oh, my friend," he said, "shall I fear Huwawa when numbered are my days? Whatever I had achieved is but a wisp of wind . . ."

"I've spoken to caution, not to stop you," Enkidu told him.

“Say not words of fear to me, Enkidu,” Gilgamesh said, putting his hand on his comrade’s shoulder. “Instead, let your mouth call to me: ‘Advance, Gilgamesh, fear not!’ For should I fail to attain my target, I will still make my name for all time remembered. ‘Gilgamesh,’ they will say in days to come, ‘against the fierce Huwawa had fallen. Of all men, he alone scaled the Cedar Mountain.’ This, my friend, of Gilgamesh shall be said, long after I have fallen. But if I gain the upper hand, the Heavens I will surely scale!”

Enkidu raised his right hand and the two locked arms.

“Let’s go, then,” Enkidu said, “and may Utu continue to watch over us.”

At first the two comrades had real fun walking with the magic boots. It was exhilarating to be able to make one small step but hop the distance of five, or take a giant stride and soar in an arc, landing fifty lengths away. Like two young boys—nay, like small children learning to walk—Gilgamesh and Enkidu tried and tested their acquired ability, taking different strides, aiming where to land, trying not to land too hard. But try as they might, they did fall and tumble many times, and when at last they decided to rest, Enkidu guessed that they had traversed some ten leagues.

“I’m hungry,” Gilgamesh said.

“And I am thirsty,” Enkidu replied.

They rested, then resumed their advance westward. The terrain was becoming hillier and bushes were giving way to trees. It was becoming increasingly difficult to take the giant strides without coming down hard against a tree. Having had his fill of pain and bruises, Gilgamesh took off the boots.

“I’d rather walk barefoot with less haste than keep falling and breaking my bones,” he said.

For a while Enkidu kept making the great strides, stopping each time to let Gilgamesh catch up with him. But he too was slowing down for lack of water, and at twenty leagues they both stopped to rest. Enkidu also took off his boots.

“The gifts of the gods,” he said, “are like a flower that hides its thorn. Within the blessing a curse is concealed.”

“Indeed so,” Gilgamesh said. “Having come to our rescue, why didn’t Lord Utu put us down at the Cedar Forest, not myriad leagues away?”

“My maker, the great Lord Enki, taught me this,” Enkidu said. “‘Even when the gods take man under their wing, they leave enough challenge for man to strive and gain or surrender and fail.’ The gods, my friend, help those who help themselves.”

“I’m tired and hungry and thirsty,” Gilgamesh told him.

“And I am running low on my fluids,” Enkidu said. “We shall dig a well.”

“I see no stream, no source of water,” Gilgamesh said.

“In the vale, where the bushes are thick, we will dig a well,” Enkidu replied, pointing to the place he had in mind.

When they had reached the spot, Enkidu broke a twig off a bush and began to probe the ground. “When the rains come and the water runs down the hills to form rivulets,” he said, “this softer soil absorbs it. Sometimes, depending on the rocks below the surface, water remains captured. Where bushes cluster, though the surface is dry, there, my friend, water might be found.”

Finding a suitable spot using his twig, he began to poke deeper into the ground.

“Here!” he announced to Gilgamesh.

With a mighty pull he uprooted a large bush. Then he showed Gilgamesh how to help him remove stones and soil from the cavity. Unsatisfied with the progress, Enkidu stripped the bush of its branches and used the bare trunk as a wedge to loosen the rocks and soil, while Gilgamesh deftly removed them to keep deepening the shaft. Thus it was Gilgamesh who was first to feel the moist soil, deep down where the roots had their farthest reach.

“There *is* water down there!” he shouted.

Working with their hands they removed the last barrier of soil and reached the subterranean water. Enkidu wet his hand and touched it to his lips, and Gilgamesh did likewise. They repeatedly wetted their lips, resting in between, and gradually felt their strength being restored. Then, using only his powerful hands, Enkidu deepened the

shaft until he could scoop up palmfuls of water. He drank until he had had his fill, and so did Gilgamesh.

“If only I had some food,” Gilgamesh said, “I would praise the Lord Utu without reservation.”

“Try the berries that grow on the bushes,” Enkidu replied. “Eat one or two and see how they taste.”

They tasted good, and Gilgamesh ate more until he had had enough. He looked at Enkidu and smiled. “The gods indeed help those who help themselves,” he said.

“Well spoken,” Enkidu answered. “Let’s do what the words mean. There’s still daylight left. Let’s put on the magic boots and advance to the Cedar Forest!”

Invigorated, and now more experienced in handling the boots’ thrusting force, the comrades made good progress. The terrain was changing as they followed the westward sun. Hills were giving way to mountains, bushes to trees. Here and there they encountered forest animals, and more birds were about. Their climb got steeper, and they realized how impossible it would have been without the help of the magic boots.

And then as they reached the top of one of the peaks, they could see the Cedar Mountains, rising as a wall of green between them and the setting sun.

They stood breathless for a while, saying not a word. Then Gilgamesh let out a cry—not words, but a cry like a lion’s roar—and jumping and soaring, he ran down the slope toward the next peak. Exhilarated, Enkidu followed suit.

They rushed up the top of the peak. Green cedar trees were growing on its slope that faced west. Now the comrades stood, casting their gaze about. Wherever they looked they saw the thick, deep green of cedar trees covering peak after peak, covering the whole mountain range. Straight tall trees with luxuriant branches and leaves rose high to the sky, their tops on the farther peaks lost among misty clouds.

They stood speechless for a long while, just gazing. Then the air’s chill brought them back to their senses and they began to make their

way down the slope to a valley below. There they would spend the night before scaling the next mountain on the morrow.

The chill made them grasp each other as they lay down to rest, and sleep came over them soon after the surge of the night. At midnight, sleep departed Gilgamesh as he was disturbed by a dream. He awakened Enkidu, for the dream put fright into him.

“My friend,” he said, “in my sleep, a dream I have seen. I saw a mountain with tall trees upon it. Two small reeds were growing among the tall trees. Then there came a storm, so strong that it toppled the mountain. And all was gone but for the two reeds.”

“It’s a favorable dream,” Enkidu told him. “The tall trees are the trees of the Cedar Forest. The mountain is the Cedar Mountain. The storm is Huwawa, the mighty guardian of the forest. And the two reeds are the two of us. Your dream, Gilgamesh, is a good omen: We shall reach the Cedar Forest, over Huwawa we shall prevail, and when the battle with the monster is done, the two of us shall remain unharmed.”

Pleased with the dream’s interpretation, Enkidu went back to sleep. Awhile later, Gilgamesh, too, fell asleep. Toward morning he was awakened by a cold shower. Then, to his utter amazement, the drops of water turned white, as though mountain barley was falling from the skies. Fearful of the sight, he put his chin between his knees, hiding his face. But the white grains continued to fall from the skies and soon he and Enkidu and everything around them were covered with soft white feathers. Gilgamesh tried to collect the stuff, but it became water in his hands. Again he awakened Enkidu, who did not feel the white grains upon his body.

“It’s called snow,” Enkidu said. “The cold of the air makes the raindrops turn white.”

Gilgamesh looked at him in disbelief. “There’s never been the likes of this in Erech,” he said.

“It happens only where there are high mountains,” Enkidu replied. He put snow to his mouth and drank it as it melted. Gilgamesh did likewise.

“Indeed, this snow turns into water,” he said, smiling. “But now I feel hungry.”

“When daylight comes, we’ll look for berries,” Enkidu told him. “In the meantime, could I have some more sleep, undisturbed?”

* * *

“There’s an incoming skyship. Pilot identifies herself as the Lady Ishtar,” the voice on the speaker in Utu’s chamber announced.

The sun had been up for more than a double-hour already.

“It’s about time!” Utu said to Uranshan. “Let’s go, I want to meet her on the platform!”

With other commanders hurrying behind him, the group rushed up to the platform. They arrived just in time to see Ishtar’s silvery globe coming fast toward the landing spot. But to their surprise, it did not slow down to hover before it made landing. Instead it whooshed over their heads, forcing them to drop to the platform.

“You are breaking the regulations!” the Platform Director shouted into his helmet.

The skyship performed a tight circle in the sky and whooshed down again toward the group headed by Utu.

“The Lady Ishtar has a message for my lord,” the Platform Director said to Utu. “‘He who awaits me, let him come and seek.’”

“Still as playful as a lion’s cub!” Utu exclaimed as the group recovered its breath. “Let me have your helmet!” he shouted to the Platform Director. And once he had it, he quickly climbed into one of the parked skyships and started its engines. Within moments the skyship lifted and hovered in place. Then, with its legs not yet retracted, it took off in a steep ascending angle in the direction that Ishtar had flown.

Maneuvering his craft higher and higher, Utu searched the skies for Ishtar’s skyship. Frustrated, he shouted into the helmet’s Whispering Stone, “Hail sister! Hail sister! Whereabouts are you, Ishtar?”

There was no answer, and he went on circling the skies, rising into the clouds, descending to the treetops. Then he heard his sister’s rolling laughter and her silvery globe suddenly whooshed down from some where above his skyship. It circled his and then disappeared

into the clouds. For a fleeting moment, as he lifted his eyes in astonishment, he caught sight of his sister's face showing through the porthole of her craft, and her enchanting laughter rolled again in his ears.

"Come and get me, Shamash!" she shouted, calling him by his nickname.

"Bitch!" he retorted, maneuvering his skyship into the clouds after her.

He caught sight of her silver dot against the backdrop of dark clouds and in a moment his ship was beside hers. "Wing to wing!" he shouted, triumphantly.

"Come over and get me!" Ishtar shouted back. "There's hunger in my body!"

"Come down then," he said, extending the legs of his skyship as a signal. Ishtar laughed, and in a moment she changed her skyship's position so that it flew almost suspended between the legs of Utu's ship.

"Come with me to our favorite lake," she said. "Let us frolic again, Shamash, as when we were young!"

"We had no responsibilities then," he said into his helmet. "Now, a mission we have to accomplish." And, breaking off contact, he directed his skyship to the landing platform.

No sooner had he landed than Ishtar did too. He stood by to greet her, and as she stepped out of her skyship he rushed forward and the two embraced and kissed, Ishtar barely containing her passion. "Let me take you down to wash and rest," Utu said.

But Ishtar claimed she was not tired at all. "Let us go to your quarters," she suggested, and he led her there.

Once alone, the two embraced again, Ishtar without holding back the passion burning within her. "Oh my brother, how I have longed for you, as in the days of our youth!" she whispered as they kissed again and again. But Shamash, she soon realized, did not match her passion. He moved his head back to take a good look at his sister.

"Beautiful as ever!" he pronounced. And indeed she was, though he could see from this close angle that she had aged since he had

seen her last.

For the first time since they had met that day, Ishtar contemplated her brother—the valiant young god, the commander of the space facilities, the dashing pilot, her playmate since the day they'd been born, her partner in tasting the forbidden fruits of Knowing as together they'd discovered and shared the joys of lovemaking.

She looked and saw a different Shamash now. Instead of challenging mischief, there was a look of wisdom—a calm wisdom—in his eyes, and there was the long beard that he had let grow ever since he had no more need of wearing the deep-space helmets. *Oh, how he has aged!* Ishtar thought with a shudder, but said nothing of that. Instead she felt his muscles, and with a light giggle said, "Oh, how strong you still are, my valiant brother!"

But he had caught her look and noticed how she had phrased her compliment, as if the opposite was true. He took her hand and set her beside him.

"The curse of our Earthly birth is upon us, my sister," he said softly. "Though the essence of Nibiru is within us, Earth's destiny is cutting our life span short."

She caressed his hand with her free hand, but the prior passion was gone.

"I've noticed that in my own body too," she admitted. "Our father who on Earth was born looks almost as old as the much older Anunnaki who came from Nibiru. . . . And we, the second generation on Earth born, though the youngest, soon shall look as old as all of them!" She looked into his eyes with sadness. "I hope Project Rejuvenation goes well?"

He was startled by her mention of the secret project. He put his finger to his lips, then moved his hand in a circle, pointing to the surrounding walls.

"The secret has not been well kept, my brother," she said. "All the gods gathered at Erech for the New Year festival, having been born on Earth, were talking about the new project in which grandfather Enlil was engaged. It was said that it involved not only a search for new sources of gold in the new lands beyond the seas but also the construction of a new spaceport . . . a spaceport not just for shipping

the gold back to Nibiru but also for sending some of us to Nibiru for rejuvenation!"

"I'll be struck!" Utu exclaimed. "Who was it that knew so much of what was meant to be a secret?"

"Ninsun, Ninharsag's daughter, seemed to know the most."

"The mother of Gilgamesh! No wonder she urged him to seek Everlife by going to the Landing Place!"

"What has Gilgamesh got to do with our own matters? The affairs of the gods are for the gods alone to consider," Ishtar said.

"But not if Nabu and Marduk have become involved!" He looked at her, concerned. "My sister, is anything amiss in Erech?"

"Treason, perhaps. . . . Ninsun and her son have connived against me."

"Tell me all," he said.

She told him of the events at the White Temple of Anu during the Fixing of the Destinies, the handiwork of Anu that had fallen to Earth from the skies, the disappearance of Gilgamesh, and her confrontation with Ninsun.

"Let me tell you what followed," Utu said in turn. He told her about intercepting Ninsun's prayer to Anu, the rescue of Gilgamesh and Enkidu after hearing their call for help, and the threatening message from Nabu. "All of which leads to two questions," he concluded. "How did the Mardukites know the whereabouts of Gilgamesh, and why the brazen attempts to capture him?"

"They might have known from Ninsun's appeal, intercepting it as you did."

"Perhaps," he said. "Establishing a monitoring network paralleling the official one would be part of the emerging pattern. But there was no mention in Ninsun's appeal of the manner or time of the king's departure."

"True," Ishtar replied. "She did not know that when I confronted her in the White Temple. It was only later in the day that the High Priest found out that Gilgamesh had left Erech by boat, sailing toward Mari."

"The High Priest? What business of his was it?"

“It seems that a harlot had come to confess her sins in the temple . . .”

“Spare me the details,” Utu answered, raising his hand to halt his sister’s speech. “Much more intriguing is the second question. Why the Mardukite effort to locate Gilgamesh, to have him seized and taken captive?”

“You have a theory?”

“Not yet, my sister. But something is afoot. . . . Let me enumerate a few facts. When Project Earth was begun, it was the scientific genius, the Lord Enki, who led the expedition, set up the gold-mining operations, and planned and erected the settlements, the control center, and the spaceport. When, in the aftermath of the Deluge, all had to be rebuilt, it was again Enki and his sons who planned and built the pyramids, the spaceport, and the mission control center. Now it is Enlil and his foremost son, Ninurta, who are engaged in the new facilities.”

“They built them and we Enlilites operate and command them,” Ishtar remarked.

“For how long? That is the question,” Utu continued. “Marduk has developed a mere landing strip in the Shagaz lands into a major base for his skyships. Nabu and his missionaries are enlisting converts among the Westerners. Borsippa is building temples, granaries, walls. Now Marduk wants the right of way at Babylon to make direct inroads into the Edin itself. I tell you, sister, he is up to something big!”

“Another war? I would have thought his ignominious defeat in the Pyramid Wars had taught him a lesson!”

“No,” Utu said. “He’d rather slither in, like the serpent he is. The incident with Gilgamesh convinces me of that.”

“You’ll have to explain,” Ishtar said.

“Your own thinking has been guided by the assumption that Ninsun and Gilgamesh have been plotting against you. But what if the plotting is not *by* them but *against* them—what if the overthrow of Gilgamesh is part of the overall plot?”

Ishtar stood up, visibly disturbed. “A plot to seize the kingship for a follower of Marduk?”

“Why not?” Utu said. “The western cities are in ferment. If Nabu succeeds, all the people inhabiting the land between here and the spaceport in the Fourth Region shall convert to the worship of Marduk. If Erech can be taken over, our father’s domain of Ur shall be squeezed between Erech and Eridu. In the north, my city Sippar will be isolated, flanked only by Mardukite’s Borsippa and Babylon and the adversary Kish. If they can get hold of Erech, the whole of Edin shall be defenseless.”

He fell silent. Ishtar bent her head down, then looked into her brother’s eyes.

“My hatred of Ninsun blinded me to misjudge Gilgamesh,” she told him.

“Now, now,” Utu replied, taking her hand into his. “These are not firm conclusions, just an outline of a possible theory that could explain the Mardukite pursuit of Gilgamesh. When you return to Erech, conduct a discreet investigation.”

“That I shall,” Ishtar said, smiling. “Now, where is this king of mine, he who seeks to become like a god?”

“On his way here, on the outskirts of the Cedar Forest. I’ve helped him as far as I should, perhaps even more than is permitted by the rules.” He winked at Ishtar. “After all, his goddess must like him *somewhat,* doesn’t she?”

Ishtar giggled. “What next?”

“Gilgamesh is on his own now. If he enters the forest, the struggle to win or lose is up to him. *We* are not allowed to interfere.”

“The fool!” Ishtar cried out. “By losing, it’s his life he shall lose, isn’t it?”

“There are the secret rays, and Huwawa . . . but you must not interfere!”

She took her brother’s hand. “My beloved brother,” she said softly, “of all the lovers I’ve had since the savage death of my spouse, Dumuzi, there have been none dearer to me than Gilgamesh. Would those who make the rules bear this in mind?”

Utu looked into his sister's eyes. They sparkled with sorrow and desire.

"Indeed," he said. "You do need a companion, and not just on the night of the Sacred Marriage." He slipped his hand out of hers. "Meanwhile, I must compose an answer to Nabu and make ready for the rocket's launching."

"What will your answer to him be?"

"Words for him to puzzle out," Utu said with a laugh. "Doubletalk, some would call it."

10

When morning came it was again Gilgamesh who awakened Enkidu, but this time it was hunger, not a dream, that had interrupted the king's sleep.

Enkidu put snow to his mouth, drinking it as it melted, then rubbed his face and hands in it. Gilgamesh did likewise and felt refreshed.

"Come," Enkidu said, "we'll collect berries for you as we look for the forest's entrance."

The magic boots served no purpose in the dense growth of trees and bushes. Slowly they climbed up the next peak, picking berries until Gilgamesh had had his fill. The view in all directions was breathtaking; the white coloring added an eerie glow to the endless green. Except for the shriek of a large bird, the tranquillity was complete.

"By the great gods!" Gilgamesh could not help saying, "It is indeed the place where the Earth touches Heaven!"

Then suddenly there was a rumble—a sound that filled not only the air but also the ground under their feet. The Heavens began to shriek and the Earth to boom! Frightened, the two comrades grasped each other, not knowing what was happening. They looked up and about them. They could hear animals, unseen by them before, beginning to howl in fear. And then from beyond the mountain that lay ahead, a dark cloud began to rise. It spread up and across, and soon its darkness obliterated the sun, making daylight turn to night. Then a lightning flashed, one as the comrades had never seen before—for it flashed not from the skies above, but from the ground upward.

"The Earth is Heaven, Heaven shall become Earth!" Gilgamesh cried out in terror. His eyes, like his comrade's, were fixed on the unraveling spectacle.

Now a flame, like that of a thousand torches lit up all at once, shot up from behind the mountain, piercing the dark cloud like a giant's spear. The dark cloud, unyielding, swelled, and the flame, rising ever higher, soon was swallowed within it. A moment later the flame disappeared and its red glow vanished, and then the skies began to shower not white grains but black ashes.

"The gods have spoken against our coming!" Gilgamesh, shivering from cold and fear, cried out. "We have been forewarned!"

"Becalm yourself," Enkidu replied. "That was no omen but the sight of your goal. A Boat of Heaven has begun its upward journey. The Landing Place, Gilgamesh, is beyond that mountain. But now that you've seen the terror of the place, do you still want to go there?"

At first Gilgamesh was disbelieving. But as the skies cleared and tranquillity returned, so did his self-confidence.

"An omen it surely was, but a good one," he said reassuringly. "A Boat of Heaven ascending with my own eyes I have now seen, a vision of my fate the gods have shown me. . . . To Heaven I shall ascend, my friend, a mortal's end I shall escape!"

Enkidu contemplated his comrade. "From now on your fate is in your own hands," he answered.

Now that the launching of the rocketship had revealed to them the location of the Landing Place within the vastness of the Cedar Forest, the two comrades resumed their advance with extra vigor. They walked, slid, crawled, and walked again in the dense forest whose ground was made slippery by the fallen snow. Crossing the mountaintop, they began descending into the valley; beyond lay the peak behind which the Landing Place was situated. They slid and slipped and muddied themselves descending, but the misery of their course was offset by the sight of gazelles dashing among the trees—brown-skinned animals whose horns curved ever so artfully.

As the comrades reached the valley between the two mountains they realized the reason for the proliferation of animals, for there flowed a stream of the purest water. The comrades washed themselves and drank the savory water. Berries grew all around. Some of unusually large size grew on short trees, their golden skins thicker than normal and their insides filled with juice.

“A divine taste!” Gilgamesh declared. “I’ve never had anything like this before.”

Once he had eaten his fill he looked about for Enkidu. He saw his comrade among the gazelles. They were totally unafraid of him. Some were licking his hands and face, and he embraced them by their necks.

“Enkidu!” Gilgamesh shouted to him, but Enkidu ignored the call. “Enkidu!” Gilgamesh shouted again, running toward his comrade.

Enkidu looked up. “My friends and playmates,” he said somewhat apologetically. ‘‘Their likes is all I had in my days of wildness . . .”

“Those days are over,” Gilgamesh told him. Picking up a twig, he used it to move the gazelles along.

One of the animals rubbed her head against Enkidu’s face. The one he was holding by the neck wiggled out of his grasp. Enkidu looked at Gilgamesh, then turned his head away.

Gilgamesh threw away the twig and embraced Enkidu silently. “Come, let’s advance,” he finally said.

Their course now took them up the slope of the final mountain. But here the scenery changed. Carcasses of dead gazelles were strewn about, and farther up the side of the mountain some trees appeared to have been damaged by fire.

“It’s like a slaughterhouse,” Gilgamesh commented as they stopped to look around. Enkidu bent down to examine one of the dead animals, then another. Impatient, Gilgamesh resumed the ascent. “Let’s go!” he shouted to Enkidu. “Stop wasting time!”

“Don’t go forward!” Enkidu shouted back. “There is death hereabouts!”

Gilgamesh looked back at Enkidu, uncomprehending.

“Look!” Enkidu said, pointing at two gazelles that had broken off from their herd and were playfully chasing each other up the slope. Then, as one ran ahead of the other, there was a sudden bolt of fire issuing among the trees, hitting the animal and the trees behind it. In a moment the air was filled with the smell of burnt wood and burnt flesh, as in a sacrificial offering on an altar, and the playful gazelle, badly burnt, lay dead.

“Great Anu!” Gilgamesh exclaimed. “What was that?”

“A killing ray,” Enkidu said. “A weapon of terror, hidden among the trees.”

“Like Ishtar’s weapon that shoots bolts?”

“Like it, yes, but one that shoots by itself when the target comes within sight.”

“By itself, or by an unseen god?”

“Who knows?” Enkidu said. “It is clear though that we cannot advance here. We must circle the mountain along the valley and search for a gateway.”

“How can there be a gate when there’s no wall, no fence to be seen?”

“The wall,” Enkidu said, “is mightier than one of stones, and the fence, though unseen, is impenetrable. The gateway, though not of stone or mortar, does exist. The Lord Enki, my creator, had once spoken to me of that. There is one place hereabouts at which the depth of the forest can be penetrated.”

“How shall we find it?” Gilgamesh wondered.

Enkidu smiled. “By the absence of burnt trees and scorched animals,” he said, and pulled Gilgamesh by the hand to return to the valley.

Gilgamesh did not move. He stood eying the dead animal. “It is burnt meat, freshly killed.”

It took Enkidu a moment to comprehend. “It’s too risky,” he replied. “You’ll be burnt to death trying to reach the animal.”

“I must have real food,” Gilgamesh told him.

Enkidu eyed his comrade and then the dead animal. “In the wild,” he said, “one beast eats the other. Why the gods taught man to do the same, I shall never understand. . . . One moment the gazelle is my playmate, the next it’s your food!”

“To offer animal sacrifices is indeed man’s duty to his gods,” Gilgamesh said. “To eat and not starve is man’s duty to himself!”

Leaving his comrade, he began to crawl toward the scorched animal, hiding behind trees for protection. Once he raised his head

slightly to get his bearings, then lay down on his belly quickly enough to be missed by a bolt of fire that shot—from among the trees—to where his head had been but a moment before. Hugging the ground even more tightly, he crawled on until he reached the dead animal. Grabbing it by its hind legs, he pulled the carcass down to safety.

Enkidu watched Gilgamesh devour pieces of the burnt flesh, eating until he could eat no more.

“Take some with you for tomorrow,” Enkidu suggested. He got up and tore off some tree branches, bending them together to form a crude basket. “Here, carry some of the meat in this,” he added.

When they resumed their march, they circled the mountain looking for the gateway. It was past noon when they came upon a stretch of forest where no animal carcasses were lying about. They moved on; a short distance away there were again dead animals on the ground.

“That was the gateway, we’ve found it!” Enkidu cried out.

“How can we be certain of that?” Gilgamesh wondered.

“I’m sure of it,” Enkidu told him. He stepped forward. Nothing happened. He took another step, then another. There was no bolt of fire to annihilate him. He went on, then turned to wave at Gilgamesh.

“Come on,” he shouted, “we’ve penetrated the Cedar Forest!”

First hesitant, then exhilarated, Gilgamesh followed him. He jumped of joy among the trees, clapping his hands. Then, stopping to catch his breath, he asked, “Which way now?”

Enkidu did not know. “Let’s search the place; perchance we’ll find a clue,” he replied.

They looked about for a while, uncertain what to look for. The height and the thin air began to have their effect on Gilgamesh.

“There’s a sharpness to the air here that makes me lightheaded,” he said. “Let’s rest awhile.” He sat down, tiredness spreading in his body. Within moments he had dozed off.

Leaving his friend, Enkidu moved about to survey the place by himself. Moving hither and thither he noticed an outcropping of rocks rising among the trees. Getting closer, he circled the rocks and saw what appeared to be a cavelike opening in them. He bent down for a closer look. There were sounds coming from inside.

“I’ve found the secret tunnel!” he shouted to Gilgamesh. “Come here, hurry!”

Gilgamesh did not answer. Instead Enkidu heard a rumbling sound that filled the air, making it difficult to judge its source. Alarmed, Enkidu stood motionless, listening. Then the sound became clearer, like that of an oncoming storm, accompanied by the sound of someone crashing through undergrowth. Someone was coming at him!

With as little noise as possible, Enkidu found his way back to where Gilgamesh was asleep. He touched the king and shook him awake. “Listen!” he whispered.

The ominous sound was coming closer, striking terror in the comrades.

“What is it?” Gilgamesh asked, whispering.

“It must be Huwawa, the forest’s guardian,” Enkidu whispered back.

Now the roaring, like the onrush of a mighty river falling in the mountains, grew louder, and the comrades, hiding among the thick cedar trees, could glimpse the monstrous guardian of the gateway. He was mighty in stature, his face fierce like that of a lion. His eyes were as large as the moon at its fullness, emitting two brilliant beams that scanned hither and thither as the monster moved its head. His mouth breathed out a deathly fire; his teeth, glowing as burning coals in an oven, were that of a dragon. His midriff was like a round potbelly, radiant on and off; for shoulders he had sockets like giant doors. In his right hand he held a weapon, like a huge sword with teeth of its own, and in his left hand he held a round mirror with which he could direct a ray that devoured all that it was pointed at. His feet moved as though they were fitted with tiny chariots advancing on their wheels, and as he stopped to scan the forest his head turned about its neck like a wheel about its hub!

“It’s Huwawa, the siege engine!” Enkidu cried out. “A monster created by the Lord Enlil. Come, let’s run out of its range!”

He pulled Gilgamesh by his robe, but Gilgamesh did not budge.

“No, I shall stand and face the terror!” Gilgamesh said. “Let it not be said, ‘Gilgamesh, reaching the gateway, like a frightened rabbit

turned back!’”

“It’s certain death,” Enkidu said. “Why do you wish to stay and face Huwawa?”

“Even if I should fall before the monster,” Gilgamesh replied, “I shall have made a name for myself. ‘Against fierce Huwawa, the terror of Enlil, Gilgamesh had risen,’ they will say long after my offspring are born. But if Huwawa I shall vanquish, the path to Everlife I shall attain!” He put his hand on his comrade’s shoulder. “You see then, by standing up to the terror, either I or my name shall forever endure!”

“I see,” Enkidu said and embraced the king. “Advance then,” he said. “Fear not, for I shall be by your side!”

The monster heard their voices, for now he was coming directly at them. His head stopped turning and his eyes’ beams were directed at the spot where the comrades were. He raised his left hand, and the burning ray scorched all that lay ahead.

“Let me go ahead and confuse Huwawa!” Enkidu cried. Looking about him, he picked out a young cedar tree and uprooted it. Dragging the tree behind him, he circled Huwawa. Alerted by the noise, the monster’s head turned on its sockets, his eyes shooting rays in all directions. Finding an opportune moment, Enkidu hit Huwawa’s groin with the tree then jumped back and ran.

The monster issued a cry of anguish, like that of the white bull slaughtered upon the altar. With his right hand he smashed against the trees around him, felling them to the ground as if they were merely reeds. He raised his left hand, and the round mirror cast scorching rays that devoured the ground around him. His head turned like a spinning wheel, its eyes’ beams searching the forest.

Standing side by side, the comrades were ready for the uneven battle. Gilgamesh pulled out his dagger. “Huwawa’s heart I shall stab, if he nears us,” he said.

Enkidu held on to the tree. “And I shall crush his skull!”

It was then that they saw, through the treetops, two silvery skyships hovering.

“Look!” Gilgamesh shouted, “The Lord Utu has come to our aid!”

One of the skyships lowered itself as much as the trees would let it, positioning itself between Huwawa and the embattled comrades. A mighty wind began blowing down from the skyship, stirring up the wet soil into a whirlpool. Sucking up mud and leaves and pebbles, the whirlpool threw the dirt into Huwawa's eyes.

"Aahhoo! Aahhoo!" the monster whined in anguish and blindly flailed his hands.

"Let's rush the monster!" Gilgamesh shouted to Enkidu.

Leading the assault, he rushed against the blinded guardian of the forest. Catching up with him, Enkidu reached for the monster and, with the tree trunk, struck its head. The head stopped turning. Now Enkidu directed his second blow at Huwawa's hand, and its weapon fell to the ground with a shattering noise.

Gilgamesh plunged his dagger into the monster's heart. There was a clanking as when metal strikes metal. Huwawa wreathed in convulsions, blindly flailing his hands against his attackers. Again and again the comrades struck until Huwawa fell to the ground. Gilgamesh struck Huwawa's forehead with his dagger, and all at once the monster's convulsions stopped.

Enkidu was about to administer another blow when there was a hissing sound and a reddish vapor arose from the creature.

"Huwawa is dead!" Gilgamesh shouted, "His soul has turned to vapor!"

"Let's make sure," Enkidu replied. He administered another heavy blow to the monster's midriff. The blow broke the creature in two, scattering its members like so many pieces of tangled metal.

"I've vanquished Huwawa!" Gilgamesh cried out.

Enkidu poked at the twisted metal with his foot. "So you have," he said solemnly. "The handiwork of the Lord Enlil, the siege engine of the Cedar Forest, is in pieces, like a shattered clay jar that has fallen off the roof."

"Why are you sad when we should be joyful?" Gilgamesh asked him. "Not only have we made a name for ourselves, but the path to the Landing Place is now wide open!"

“Sad I am, indeed,” Enkidu answered, “for as I look at the shattered handiwork of Lord Enlil, I can’t help thinking of myself: the handiwork of Lord Enki. . . . In the fate of Huwawa, I can’t help seeing my own.”

“Nonsense!” Gilgamesh said. “You’ve seen with your own eyes that the gods are with us!”

The words reminded them of the skyships. They looked up, but the skyships were gone, nowhere to be seen.

Collecting small rocks, Gilgamesh piled them up. “The Lord Utu is my rock,” he said. “Let this commemorate my gratitude.” He turned to Enkidu. “Come, let’s find the Landing Place! The gods wish me to attain my goal!”

“Indeed so,” Enkidu said. “Before the monster came upon us, I had found the secret tunnel of the Anunnaki!”

“Take me there at once!” Gilgamesh cried out excitedly.

Showing the way, Enkidu led Gilgamesh to the rock outcropping and pointed to the cavelike opening. Putting his ear to it, Gilgamesh too could hear faint sounds from it.

“Quick, let’s clear the entrance!” Gilgamesh urged his comrade.

Feverishly the two worked, uprooting the underbrush that grew over the opening, removing rocks that were piled up against it. The more they cleared the opening the clearer the sounds from within became, sounding like that of a smith’s bellows. When their toil revealed the size and shape of the opening, they could see that it was perfectly round and barred by grillwork.

“By the great lords!” Gilgamesh exclaimed. “It is the handiwork of the Anunnaki! We’ve found the entrance to the Landing Place!”

“Let me remove the bars so that we may lower ourselves into the tunnel,” Enkidu told him.

He grabbed the bars and pulled them with all his strength, but they did not budge. Again and again he heaved and pulled, breathing heavily, exerting every muscle in his body. The effort caused his hands to feel warm.

“I’ve got a burning sensation in my hands,” Enkidu said. “The grillwork has a bite to it.”

“Pull harder, harder!” Gilgamesh urged him.

Once again Enkidu grabbed the bars, clasping his fingers about them like an eagle's claws. He filled his lungs with the cool fresh air, and letting out a cry, pulled with all his strength. Again the bars did not budge nor bend, but Enkidu would not let go. And then there was a snapping sound and Enkidu fell back, the grillwork in his hands.

"You've done it!" Gilgamesh shouted. "Let's enter the tunnel!"

But Enkidu remained lying without moving. Gilgamesh rushed to his side. Enkidu groaned and threw the grillwork away. "My hands!" he said. "They are burnt. I can't move my fingers!"

Gilgamesh grabbed his comrade's hands. They were swollen, and where they had grasped the bars there were crimson stripes, like deep cuts. He helped Enkidu sit up against a tree, not knowing what else to do.

"There's a curse upon the entrance," Enkidu said, "an unseen fire. . . . The tunnel, Gilgamesh, for the gods alone it is meant."

"We'll see about that," Gilgamesh said. "Right now, shall I rub some soil on your hands or cover them with leaves?"

"Take me to the stream in the valley below," Enkidu said, "to wash my hands in the pure water, where I can immerse my whole body. It's the only way I can think of to have the curse removed from me."

Helping his comrade up and supporting him, Gilgamesh slowly led the disabled Enkidu down to the stream in the valley. Putting Enkidu down, he undressed him then undressed himself. Thus naked, with only girdles around their waists from which dangled Enkidu's pouch and the king's dagger, the two went into the water. While Enkidu immersed himself completely in it, Gilgamesh bathed his comrade's body, especially his hands.

Gradually the redness in Enkidu's hands waned and the swellings subsided.

"I feel better," Enkidu said. "I can move my fingers now."

The gazelles that had initially dispersed when the comrades arrived at the stream gradually began to return. Sensing something about Enkidu that attracted them, some of them approached him. He let them lick his hands.

“My energy is returning to me!” he cried out to Gilgamesh. Grabbing the animals nearest to him by their necks, he raised himself out of the water and then hugged the two gazelles affectionately.

Gilgamesh watched the scene silently. *Are they females?* he wondered.

Now Enkidu was rubbing his head against the head of one of the gazelles. Incredulous, Gilgamesh watched as the gazelle rose on its hind legs and pressed its buttocks against Enkidu.

Knowing his comrade only too well, Gilgamesh feared what Enkidu might do next.

“Enkidu, don’t!” he cried out.

“Go away!” Enkidu retorted. “The call of the wild is in me!”

“No, no!” Gilgamesh shouted. “Think of Salgigti, her warm loins, her firm breasts! With knowledge of the gods you are now blessed, Enkidu. Don’t cast it all away to the winds!”

“I am not a mortal man,” Enkidu said. “Your laws are not my laws.”

“Think of Erech,” Gilgamesh said. “Think of the pleasure lasses, of our friendship!”

For a few moments the comrades stood facing each other. Unsure of himself, Enkidu lessened his embrace of the animals. One wiggled out of his grasp. He was still holding on to the other when he and Gilgamesh were startled by a roar of laughter. They looked up and saw a goddess, in pilot’s garb, standing beside a skyship. Absorbed in their confrontation, the two had not noticed its arrival and landing near the stream.

“What a scene, what a sight!” the goddess said. “The king of Erech naked as his comrade, and the comrade about to plow a beast!”

Gilgamesh recognized the voice. “Ishtar!” he cried out. “The Queen of Heaven!”

He fell to the ground and bowed, and after a slight hesitation, Enkidu did likewise.

“Praise be the lords,” Gilgamesh said, “for helping us vanquish Huwawa.”

“Thank the Lord Shamash,” Ishtar said. “The two of us watched the battle from above, but it was he who blew the wind in the guardian’s face. He expected Huwawa to turn and leave you unmolested. Instead, you attacked the handiwork of Enlil and destroyed it! By that, the wrath of the great lord you have brought upon yourselves!”

Gilgamesh arose to better address the goddess.

“Great Mistress of Erech,” he said, “whatever my destiny is, that is what I’ve set out to attain. If being two-thirds divine entitles me to Everlife, then that shall be my fate—no matter what I do.”

Ishtar cast her gaze upon Gilgamesh. She had never seen him fully naked in daylight before.

“Come here,” she said. “Approach me.”

His body was dripping water as he approached her. Ishtar raised an eye at his beauty.

“Come, Gilgamesh, be my lover!” she said sultrily. “Come, grant me your essence!” And, having thus spoken, with quick movements she took off her own clothes and held up her breasts in her hands as invitation.

Gilgamesh, lover of many women, was stunned by her beauty. He too had never seen her thus naked in daylight.

“Oh Ishtar, holy Irnina,” he said as he went down to his knees, grabbing her extended hand. “How I’ve craved you, desired your warm loins, dreamt of your luscious lips!” He kissed her hand fervently.

“Come then,” she said, “be my lover now and attain your dream!” She bent down, lowering her breasts toward his lips.

He was about to kiss the offered nipples when he held back. “It’s not the wedding night,” he said. “If I make love to you now, death will be my verdict.”

“Fear not, Gilgamesh,” she replied. “Be my lover now, and forever you shall be my husband! Grant me of your fruit now, and I shall become your wife!”

Gilgamesh was perplexed. “What do I have to offer you, that you speak of marriage?”

“Hush, eye-filling Gilgamesh,” Ishtar said. “It is I who will give you glorious things . . . a chariot of lapis and gold, the yield of hills and plains, brought to you in tribute!” She extended her hand to him. “Come, my beloved, let us make the forest our bed, the cedars our fragrance!”

Gilgamesh cast an eye at the silent Enkidu who was standing by the stream. His friend said nothing, only shook his head.

“You’re like a brazier that goes out in the cold,” Gilgamesh said to Ishtar, refusing her hand. “This moment you are burning with love, next you shall discard me as a shoe that pinches its owner. Which of your lovers, save for Dumuzi for whom you have ordained yearly wailing, did you love forever? Having loved the son of Silili, you cursed him and turned him into a wolf. You loved Ishullanu, your father’s gardener. To him you also said, ‘Oh my Ishullanu, let me taste your vigor! Put forth your hand, touch my modesty,’ then you smote him too. No, if I should love you now—a day not destined for the Sacred Marriage—death, not eternal life, I shall find this day!”

Ishtar let out an angry cry. “Do not defy me, Gilgamesh!” she said. “Your kingship, your life, are in my hands!”

Seeing his comrade waver, Enkidu stepped forward. “The moment for momentous decisions is not opportune,” he said. “Judge not Gilgamesh on his answer, for he is about to attain Everlife.” He bowed before the goddess.

“Indeed,” Gilgamesh spoke up. “We’ve found the entrance to the secret tunnel of the Anunnaki.”

“What are you talking about?” Ishtar asked him.

“Up there, in the rocks beyond the gateway to the Cedar Forest,” Gilgamesh said, pointing. “The tunnel’s entrance was blocked with mighty grillwork, but Enkidu pulled it open.”

“Fools!” Ishtar shouted. “It’s not a tunnel of the Anunnaki but the cave of the Bull of Heaven!”

“The Bull of Heaven?”

“You don’t know much, King of Erech?” Ishtar said, mockery in her voice. “The Bull of Heaven is the oldest beast alive on Earth. From Nibiru by the great Lord Anu it was brought on his visit, a gift to his

son the Lord Enlil, to be a symbol of the starry station of Earth in the zodiac. It is unlike the bulls of Earth, not only in its longevity. Unlike the earthly ones, this one has wings to fly!"

"I've seen an image of a winged bull in Nippur," Enkidu said, "guarding the entrance to Enlil's temple."

"Indeed so," Ishtar said. "An image had to be made, for the sacred animal in the flesh became too unwieldy, bereft of females of its kind. Lest it cause havoc in its wrath, an underground pasture for it within the Cedar Mountain was created. The grillwork that you've removed protected one of the air shafts!"

"We've done a foolish thing, Enkidu," Gilgamesh said gloomily.

"Foolish and defiant," Ishtar confirmed. "You have crushed Huwawa, the handiwork of the Lord Enlil. Against me, defiance you've spoken. Now, the cave of the Bull of Heaven you've broken open. The wrath of the gods you've surely provoked, Gilgamesh. Now be gone and be damned!"

She put on her clothes and walked back to her skyship. Gilgamesh and Enkidu too began to dress. It was then that they all heard a terrifying snorting and a breathing like a thousand smiths' bellows. They looked up the mountain. At the gateway there stood a giant white beast, kicking the ground. Its head was lowered as in a challenge, and they could see its big eyes and long beard. From its head there protruded not just the two horns of a bull, but another, more hooked long horn in the midst. Its tail was raised in anger, and from its elongated body there were spread two immense wings.

"It's the Bull of Heaven!" Ishtar shouted as she mounted her sky-ship. "It is out of its cave. Earth's calamity you have unleashed!"

"Great lady!" Gilgamesh cried out, but his cry was no longer heard, for now the skyship was above the treetops.

"Quick, put on the magic boots!" Enkidu shouted.

They did so with trembling hands, certain that the Bull of Heaven had seen them, for it began to rush down the mountain toward them. As it gathered speed, it spread its wings and soared into the air in their direction. The two cowered in fear, grabbing each other.

The Bull of Heaven landed near them with a mighty thump that shook the ground, causing all the animals to flee. Snorting, its hot breath rising in the cool airlike steam, it readied itself to charge.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh stood immobilized with awe for a few moments as the monster eyed them.

“Run, run for your life!” Enkidu finally shouted, and the two of them took off, their magic boots making them soar and land a great distance away.

They landed hard, unused to wearing the boots again. They were barely upon their feet when the Bull of Heaven, flying above them like a vast cloud that covers the day with darkness, was upon them. It landed with a mighty thud where the comrades had stood, for they had jumped aside just in time. Now the Bull of Heaven snorted even more mightily than before, and each snorting opened in the ground pits large enough to hold two hundred men.

The bull circled the two beleaguered comrades, and the comrades circled the bull, looking for a spot from which to jump.

“Ouhoo!” Enkidu suddenly shouted as he slipped and fell into one of the pits.

Hearing the shout, the Bull of Heaven turned, lowering its head toward the pit. At that moment, with all the courage still in him, Gilgamesh jumped up and landed on the bull’s back, thrusting his dagger into its neck.

Enraged, the wounded animal turned again to find its attacker. Using the respite, Enkidu jumped out of the pit and grabbed the animal by its tail, holding fast, letting it not move or shake Gilgamesh off. Atop the bull, Gilgamesh thrust his dagger into its neck again and again. Then the Bull of Heaven issued a groan like that of a thousand dying warriors and fell on its side. It heaved and wiggled awhile, then lay still.

From above, hovering in her skyship, Ishtar had watched the unfolding battle.

As the Bull of Heaven was slain, Ishtar cried out in agony, her voice booming down to the triumphant comrades. “What evil you have done! The Bull of Heaven, the destiny of Enlil’s era, you have

slain! The wrath of the great gods shall now be upon you. Go away, evildoers! Go and await your punishment!”

The comrades looked up at the swirling skyship. Gilgamesh raised his hands in supplication and fell to his knees.

“Go, for the Cedar Forest you shall never enter!” the voice boomed again at them. And no sooner had Ishtar spoken than a brilliant flash emanated from the skyship toward the forest’s invisible gateway. There was a shattering of rocks and a crush of trees, and where the ray hit the forest, fires and flames erupted.

“Go back to await your punishment or my brilliance shall consume you too!” Ishtar’s voice boomed from the skyship.

Gilgamesh stood up, raising a fist toward the craft.

“It is by the will of the gods that I have vanquished Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven!” he shouted. “In fair battle have I the creature from Nibiru slain. I am now worthy to be taken to Nibiru!”

“The gateway is forever closed, and your fate by the Seven Who Judge shall be determined!” Ishtar announced. “Go away or I shall turn you to vapor!”

Enkidu tugged at his comrade. “There’s no wisdom in angering the gods,” he said. “Your valor has been established; there’s nothing more that can be achieved here. Come, let’s to Erech return and there establish your name, your glory to proclaim!”

“So be it,” Gilgamesh answered him, “but first let’s claim our trophies.”

Using his dagger, he cut off the Bull of Heaven’s three horns. The two short ones he gave to Enkidu to carry. The other, the long horn, he carried himself.

* * *

To Erech they then returned. With the aid of the magic boots, they completed a journey of a month and fifteen days in a mere three days. Word of their return and their deeds in the Cedar Forest preceded them; people came out of their villages to view the hopping comrades and admire their trophies. At the gate of Erech they were met by the city’s fifty heroes, led by the king’s chamberlain, Niglugal.

But the Elders did not come out to greet them, and in the streets many houses were shuttered.

Back in the palace, Gilgamesh summoned the craftsmen, the armorers, and all of the artisans to admire the Bull of Heaven's horns and to hear their suggestions as to how the horns might best be preserved as trophies. After all had spoken, the long middle horn was hung on the wall behind the king's throne as a constant reminder of his feats in the Cedar Forest. The two other horns were taken away to be coated with gold, two fingers thick, and adorned with beads of lapis. After this was done, the bejeweled horns were filled with scented wines.

Though two men were typically needed to carry each horn, Gilgamesh lifted each one by himself. From the first one he drank and praised the great gods, thanked his godfather, Utu, and paid homage to his mother, who, by her womb, had made him two-thirds divine. And from the other he drank and paid homage to his ancestors on his father's side, priests and kings all, and especially the hero Lugalbanda.

"Divine I shall yet be, Everlife I shall yet attain!" he pronounced. "Let there be celebrations in the palace!" But in the Sacred Precinct, Ishtar assembled the priests and priestesses, and over the slaying of the Bull of Heaven set up a great wail.

"Oh Anu, great father!" she cried out a message, "let those who slew the sacred bull, who had defamed your beloved Irnina, pay with their lives!"

11

In the night, after the banquet, Enkidu had a dream.

His screams awakened Gilgamesh. They were bedded side by side, and it took Gilgamesh a few moments to realize that they were not in the palace but in Salgigti's house of pleasure, where they had gone after the banqueting at Enkidu's urging.

Enkidu, flailing his hands, was screaming at the door. "Oh door, it is I who made you, it is I who raised you!" he was shouting. "Do not let through those who come after me, be they king or god! Let no one erase my name that is upon you and place his own name there instead!"

Gilgamesh was puzzling over his comrade's strange rantings when Enkidu grabbed the doorposts and ripped them out. Gilgamesh jumped up and grabbed his comrade. "What has come over you?" he asked gently. "How can one who has wisdom say such strange things?"

"Oh Gilgamesh," Enkidu said, tears in his eyes. "A dream I had. In my dream I saw my name inscribed upon the door. A bright being, a king or a god, appeared at the door. He rubbed out my name and was replacing it with his own. . . . It is a bad omen, Gilgamesh!"

As he spoke, Salgigti appeared, having been awakened by the noise. She saw the ripped-out doorposts and let out a wail.

"Enkidu had a nightmare," Gilgamesh explained. "I will make good your damage on the morrow."

Becalmed, she neared Enkidu and put out her hands to embrace him. But he looked at her strangely and shoved her away.

"Of you I've also dreamt," he said to her. "It was you who led the defacer to my door."

Salgigti stepped back. "I've let no one in, I was asleep in my bed. I don't understand your strange words."

“No, it *was* you!” Enkidu shouted, lunging at her.

“What has come over you, Enkidu?” Gilgamesh cried out as he tried to restrain his friend. But Enkidu gave his comrade a mighty shove also.

“It was her!” he shouted, enraged. “She led doom to my door!”

Seized with panic, Salgigti knelt down, humbling herself before Enkidu. “Forgive me,” she implored. “They made me speak and break my oath . . .”

“What are you saying?” Gilgamesh shouted. “Speak clearly!”

“The priests . . . they seized me after the royal guards had questioned me. . . . Of your change of clothes and of Adadel they had already known, I know not how. They slapped my face before the High Priest, the wrath of the gods they were bringing upon me. . . . I told them what I knew.”

“My dream *was* true!” Enkidu shouted. “The harlot has betrayed us!” He lunged at her, catching her by the throat. His hands, like a vise, began to choke her. “Death, death unto you!” he shouted.

Gilgamesh rushed to pull his comrade’s hands off the woman’s throat. But at that moment it was Enkidu, not the woman, who let out a cry.

“My hands!” he cried out, letting go of Salgigti’s throat. “My hands! They are going numb!”

Gilgamesh pulled his comrade away from Salgigti. “Be gone, woman,” he said, “for the wrath of the gods indeed shall be upon you. Cursed shall you be, and cursed shall be your house! Now, go open the door that we may leave!”

He examined Enkidu’s hands. They were red and swollen like they had been in the Cedar Forest after Enkidu pried open the cave’s bars.

“Come, Enkidu, to the palace,” Gilgamesh said. “There we shall wash your hands with pure water and restore your strength.”

“It’s no use,” Enkidu replied, sitting down. “I now know that my dream was true, and the rest of it shall also come true. . . . A divine emissary is on his way, my name to erase. . . . Through the

nameless doorposts he shall lead me to the Land of No Return." Overcome by weakness, his hands dropped beside his body.

A great anxiety seized Gilgamesh. "To my mother Ninsun's House of Resuscitation let us then hurry," he said. "Whatever your malady, she will cure it."

He helped Enkidu up and supported him as they left Salgigti's house. In the street the weakness spread over Enkidu's whole body and he began to stumble. Seeing a patrol, Gilgamesh hailed the soldiers. Using their spears and girdles they made a stretcher to carry Enkidu to Ninsun's hospital. Surprisingly, the crowd that usually gathered before sunup, awaiting the gate to be opened, was not there. It was only after some banging that the gate was opened for Gilgamesh.

"Hurry, call the Lady Ninsun!" he shouted, "for Enkidu is severely ill!"

They carried Enkidu into the hospital's compound. Moments later Ninsun's handmaiden, Ninsubar, appeared.

"Your mother, the Lady Ninsun, is not here," she told Gilgamesh. "She was summoned to Nippur to attend an assembly of the gods called by the great Lord Enlil." She knew not when Ninsun was expected back.

They carried Enkidu to one of the smaller buildings. For seven days and seven nights he lay on a couch, unable to move, unable to eat or drink, delirious from time to time and seeing evil dreams. Gilgamesh did not budge from his comrade's side. From time to time he wet Enkidu's mouth, and it was at such moments that Enkidu could move his lips, murmuring his dreams to his companion.

On the seventh night, before he passed out completely, Enkidu told Gilgamesh his latest dream.

"Oh my friend," he mumbled in a whine, "I saw a dream. The Heavens shouted, the Earth responded. I was standing between them. There was a young man whose face was dark like the face of Zu, his talons like an eagle's claws. He overpowered me. . . . He submerged me, in what I do not know. He transformed me so that my arms were like those of a bird. Then he led me to the House of Darkness, from which none who have entered leave. Its dwellers are

bereft of light, dust is their fare and clay is their food. . . . Clothed as birds, with wings for garments, are their guardians . . .”

And then he stopped talking and passed out.

For another day and another night Gilgamesh paced by the couch, touched his friend, rubbed his hands, put water to his lips. Enkidu did not move, neither opening his eyes nor pursing his lips, but he was not dead.

Crowds assembled outside the compound, eager for the latest news of the king and his comrade. The Elders of the city were there too, whispering evil of the comrades. “Because they have slain the Bull of Heaven, seven years of barren husks shall afflict the land of Erech,” they said. “There shall be no grain for the people, no grass for the beasts on account of the evil of the king and his comrade.”

The next day Ninsun’s faithful handmaiden conveyed the Elders’ words to Gilgamesh: “Enkidu is dying. The king is dying too. So has Anu, father of the gods, decreed.”

Distraught and angered, Gilgamesh came to the gate. There were cries of surprise and pity as he showed himself—his hair unkempt, his cheeks hollow, his nails grown like a vulture’s talons, his eyes red from sleeplessness and crying.

“Hear me, oh Elders of Erech!” he said as loudly as he could, for all the people to hear. “It is for Enkidu, my comrade, that I weep—he who was like a shield unto me, who with me scaled the white-powdered mountains, brought damnation upon Huwawa in the Cedar Forest, and the Bull of Heaven did slay. And now, a sleep without ending has taken hold of him. He breathes but cannot move, he hears me but cannot speak . . . he lives not but is not dead. . . . Now do tell me, people of Erech, shall I veil Enkidu my comrade as a bride and call his heartbeat ended, or shall I cry unto the gods that a hero like none before, a creature uniquely fashioned by the Lord Enki, shall arise again, and by its living, the glory of the gods attest?”

There was a hushed silence as Gilgamesh concluded his bewailing. Ashamed of their eagerness for tragic news, the people dispersed, the Elders returning to their abodes. Relieved somewhat, Gilgamesh returned to his comrade’s bedside. But Enkidu lay as motionless as before. Gilgamesh touched his heart; it did not beat.

With trembling hands Gilgamesh veiled his comrade like a groom does to a bride. Then he tore his clothes, and by the couch, sat down on the floor to mourn.

That same afternoon Ninsun returned from Nippur. She saw Gilgamesh sitting on the floor, looking like a ghost. She saw Enkidu lying on the couch as if dead.

“Oh my mother!” Gilgamesh cried out when he saw her. “Enkidu is dead, and my own death is waiting!” He held out his right hand; it was jerking uncontrollably.

“Oh my son, beloved son,” Ninsun said as she took his head to her bosom. “When you were born, on a bed of honor I made you lie. When your sixth finger was circumcised, Utu held you in his arms. When you were growing up, to royalty and heroship I raised you. And now, when mortal fears fill your heart, long life I shall yet attain for you!”

She put her hand to Enkidu’s temple. “Enkidu is not dead, Gilgamesh,” she said. “The great gods, the Seven Who Judge, have otherwise decreed.”

Overjoyed, Gilgamesh took a moment to revel in the news, and then he asked, “And I?”

“Come with me to my chambers, refresh your heart with nectar, and I will tell you what has transpired in Nippur,” Ninsun said and took her son by the hand.

“But Enkidu . . .” Gilgamesh began to say, reluctant to leave his comrade.

“He will regain his senses. Now come with me,” she told him.

When they were in Ninsun’s chambers, she ordered her handmaiden to bring a certain nectar for Gilgamesh. When the filled cup was brought to him, he grabbed it to quench his thirst, but Ninsun admonished him to sip the nectar slowly. Soon some color returned to his cheeks and the jerking of his hand ceased.

“The wailing of Ishtar,” Ninsun began, “reached unto Anu, the Heavenly Father. ‘Gilgamesh has heaped insults against me,’ she complained to him. ‘The Bull of Heaven he and Enkidu have slain; Huwawa the guardian of the Cedar Forest they have smitten.’ The

great Lord Anu then sent word to the Lord Enlil. ‘Let Gilgamesh and Enkidu be sentenced by the Seven Who Judge as to whether they shall live or die.’ That, my son, was the word of the great Lord Anu.”

“Whether to live or *die*?” Gilgamesh cried out. “Was it not with divine help that we reached the Cedar Forest? Did not Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven challenge us, by divine design, my right to establish Everlife?”

“My son, becalm yourself,” Ninsun said. “Though two-thirds of you are godly, the affairs of the gods you are far from knowing. Hush till I tell you of the divine assembly.”

She sat herself on her favorite armchair, Gilgamesh on a low stool opposite her. It was twilight, and the sun’s rays that shone through the ceiling’s latticework were reddish and fuzzy.

“Nippur, the Navel of the Earth before the Deluge, is still a sight to see, Gilgamesh,” she began to tell him. “Its seven-staged tower is resplendent from afar, awesome from nearby. A garden with all manner of flowers, and an orchard with every kind of fruit tree, surrounds it. Hummingbirds sing in the trees and peacocks walk the garden’s paths. A canal leads from the great rivers to the place of anchorage, a basin large enough to hold the barques of all the visiting gods. And in a masterful enclosure, which we were allowed to see, was Enlil’s Boat of Heaven . . .

“The great Lady Ninlil was a most gracious hostess. Father Enlil, having been summoned from the Land Beyond the Seas, presided. With him came the foremost son, the Lord Ninurta. The great Lord Enki, Enkidu’s creator, came from Eridu. Sitting to Enlil’s left, he insisted that the throne next to him be left vacant, assigned in absence to the exiled Lord Marduk . . .”

“Of the Seven Who Judge—who *were* then the seven?”

“Those three; the Lord Sin, Enlil’s firstborn on Earth; the Lord Adad, Enlil’s youngest, who had come from the western domains; and the Lord Utu. And, keeping the peace as she had done before, my mother, the great Ninharsag.”

“And Ishtar?”

“Like Nabu, she was an accuser.”

“Like Nabu?”

“Yes, but his complaint was against Utu, for improper divine interference, the transgression having been your rescue by the skyship west of the great river.”

“But we were tracked, attacked, and about to be seized!”

“Or lost in the wilderness and about to be rescued. It all depends on who tells the story. I, of course, told mine.”

He looked up at her; there were tears in her eyes.

“What is it, my mother?” he asked, alarm in his voice. “What evil is there in store?”

“Gilgamesh,” she said, “having been in Erech so long, all that mattered seemed to be happening here in Erech. But out there, in the olden lands as well as in the lands beyond, time has not stood still. Enlil and Enki, dashing heroes who set out to master a planet, are tired and old. My mother, a beauty over whom two successors to the heavenly throne competed, is now old and heavy. And those who on Earth were born are getting to look as aged as their parents. How long and to what purpose shall we stay on upon Earth? That was the bothersome question . . .”

“The legends,” Gilgamesh said, “tell of a golden age that started it all. Was it not so?”

Ninsun pressed his head against her bosom. “Indeed, eons ago the Anunnaki settled on Earth for its gold. Nibiru was losing its atmosphere, its air, and our scientists protected it with suspended particles of gold. A great project was set afoot. Gold was extracted on Earth, then sent aloft to orbiting platforms for periodical transfer by spaceships to Nibiru. At first it was obtained from the waters of the Lower Sea, then from deep below the ground in the Lower World. In time the toil proved unbearable; the Anunnaki mining the ores mutinied. It was then that Man was fashioned to be a primitive worker. My mother and the Lord Enki fashioned him . . .”

She paused, caught in thoughts. “Then mankind increased in numbers, and the Anunnaki began to take the daughters of Man as wives. And when the Deluge was about to overwhelm Earth, Enlil decreed that only the Anunnaki could save themselves, by lifting off in our spacecraft, leaving mankind to perish. When the waters

returned to their confines and the Anunnaki could land back on Earth, all that was before was swept over and buried under a sea of mud. A new spaceport had to be built, this time in the land called Tilmun. A new mission control center replaced Nippur's. Then rivalries led to wars, and Earth had to be divided. And now you and Enkidu have upset it all by slaying the Bull of Heaven!"

"Your words are a riddle," Gilgamesh said.

"The great cycle that Earth makes about the Sun is divided into Twelve Ages," Ninsun replied. "Each has been named in honor of a great Anunnaki. The Bull of Heaven, a gift of Anu to Enlil, symbolized the Age of Enlil. Because it has been slain, turmoil is now in store. The Age of the Bull, Enlil's era, has been mortally wounded."

"That cannot be!" Gilgamesh exclaimed. "The Lord Enlil shall reign forever!"

"The die has been cast," Ninsun said sorrowfully. "You were the handyman of fate, Gilgamesh. The Age of Enlil shall be replaced, but the omen is of violence and death. And what Age shall follow? Will it be that of the Divine Archer, so named after Enlil's foremost son, the warrior Ninurta, or will it be the Age of the Ram, symbol of Marduk, Enki's firstborn? Nothing is clear anymore. By your search for Everlife, Gilgamesh, you have stirred up uncertainty and apprehension among the gods. What you have done has become woven into the affairs of the gods."

"And rightly so! I belong among them, being two-thirds divine. My birth with six fingers has destined me to a godly fate!"

"Yes, your fate," Ninsun said. "It is time to speak of that which in Nippur transpired. Ishtar demanded the death of both of you. Adad was of equal mind. Utu pressed your defense. Enlil said, 'Let Enkidu die, Gilgamesh live.' The Lord Enki defended his creature. 'Enkidu knew not slaying until mortal traits in Erech he acquired,' he said. 'Let Erech be punished with a seven-year drought; let Enkidu live, let Gilgamesh die.' My mother pleaded for the sparing of both of you. Then the Lord Ninurta spoke, 'Let Enkidu be spared but banished to toil forever in the gold mines, and let Gilgamesh end his days as a mortal.' And that, my son, was the sentence."

“To live but lose my comrade, to live but await death!” Gilgamesh exclaimed. “It is a punishment worse than death itself!”

His hand jerked violently, and Ninsun grabbed it to steady it.

“My son,” she said, “to my mother, the great Healer, I’ve told the secret of the Tablet of Destinies. Though it was not intended for you, by it you have been fated. Having put your hands inside Anu’s handiwork, unseen death you have touched. A sheer mortal would have been dead by now.”

He pulled his hand away. “Go on!” he cried out.

“Your hand-jerking is a bad omen, Gilgamesh. The malady, if not counteracted, will eat your bones and shrink your muscles. Of a magical plant my mother told me . . . it can preserve your life.”

“Tell me of it!”

“It is a secret of the gods, Gilgamesh. You must purify yourself and make amends to the gods that you have offended before you may hear of it. Pray for yourself and for Enkidu, and go and sit by him until he awakens. Then I shall speak to you of a certain plan.”

“I shall do as you say, my mother,” Gilgamesh said and kissed his mother’s hand.

“Do not delay,” she told him. “There is a large crowd besieging the gate—a multitude of people seeking healing. They’ve been kept away long enough. Hold your rites by nightfall so that we can let them in in the morning.”

* * *

From the palace the artisans were summoned to fashion for Gilgamesh a golden image of the Bull of Heaven, the symbol of the Lord Enlil. While the artisans and servants were busy following the king’s instructions, Gilgamesh washed and purified himself.

Before sundown he came out into the courtyard wearing a pure garment of white linen. The table of acacia wood that had been brought over from the palace was placed in the center of the courtyard. Upon it were set the golden Bull of Heaven and the emblems of the other gods: the Winged Disc of the great Lord Anu, the crescent of the Lord Sin, the radiating disc of Shamash, and the

eight-pointed disc of Ishtar. The symbol of Ninharsag (whose healing secret was to be divulged) was in the shape of an umbilical cutter.

Gilgamesh called for a bowl of carnelian filled with honey and a bowl of lapis filled with curds and put them on the table. Then a pigeon in its cage was also placed thereon.

“Oh great gods,” Gilgamesh said, “forgive my transgressions. As I offer you this fruit of the milk, dry not the lips that suckled godly milk. As I offer you this bowl of honey, wipe not away the sweetness of my life. For the slaying of the Bull of Heaven, accept this image as restitution.”

He bowed seven times, then mixed the honey and the curds and put the bowls before the image of the Bull of Heaven. Then he took the cage and released the pigeon. “Oh great Anu, Heavenly Father,” he said, “as I have given wing to this bird, take me under *your* wing. Carry me aloft like an Eagle, to your celestial abode!”

He bowed again, seven times. Then he turned away and went to be with Enkidu.

* * *

When dawn came, Enkidu began to stir. He lifted his head and opened his eyes. He saw Gilgamesh and held out his hand.

“How long have I been sleeping?” he asked. Gilgamesh took his hand, and then the other. The redness was gone and the swellings had disappeared. There was strength in Enkidu’s arms.

“At Salgigti’s house a great weakness overcame you,” Gilgamesh said. “Twelve days and twelve nights you’ve slept without ceasing. To cure your weakness I’ve brought you here, to my mother’s House of Resuscitation. Now you’re well!”

There was sadness in Enkidu’s eyes as he stared at his friend, holding on to his hand.

“There’s more to my sleep, isn’t there?” he asked. “I know things from my dream.”

“Remove all evil thoughts,” Gilgamesh replied. “Let me put pure water to your lips and wash your body, and you shall be fully recovered.”

“The dream,” Enkidu said, “must have a meaning. In my dream I saw two emissaries. They had wings for garments. One came forward, the other stayed back. The first one took me by the arm to lead me away. ‘Follow me’ he said, ‘to the House of Darkness, whose dwellers are bereft of light; clay is their food and dust is in their mouths.’ I stood my ground, refusing to go. ‘I shall not abandon my comrade!’ I shouted. The other emissary nodded his head. ‘Go, for he too shall go,’ he said. Then another hand touched me, and I awoke.”

“Think not of evil dreams, Enkidu,” Gilgamesh said. “For our transgressions I’ve prayed and offered sacrifices. Whatever doom there was in store, under the protection of the Lady Ninharsag, the great Healer, we have come, and my mother a lifesaving plan has devised. . . . Now let me rush to her and tell her of your awakening.”

Informed of the news, Ninsun returned to Enkidu’s bedside with Gilgamesh. She touched Enkidu, then passed her wand over his body.

“Though not a mortal, you were gravely ill,” she told him. “But now you are fully healed. Do not exert yourself for a while, just walk about. And drink only pure water.”

She turned to Gilgamesh. “We can let the crowds in now,” she told him. “Come and have the morning meal with me in my chambers.”

To her chambers they returned. There the handmaiden served them wheat cakes, dates, and pure water. When they were alone Ninsun turned to her son. There was a grave look on her face.

“My son,” she said, “have you heard of Ziusudra?”

“The legends I’ve heard of a man of long ago, when the Deluge swept over the Earth.”

She nodded. “Thousands of Earth-years ago. He was a man of Shuruppak, my mother’s city. He was righteous in his ways and of divine lineage, for the Lord Utu was his father’s father. The Lord Enki saved him and his wife, and all that was his, from the floodwaters.”

“I’ve heard the legends,” Gilgamesh said. “But that was long ago. They are all gone and dead forever, remembered only in old men’s tales.”

“Not so. . . . It is a secret of the gods, but my mother permitted me to reveal it to you. Ziusudra and his wife are still among the living!”

“It cannot be!” Gilgamesh exclaimed. “His wife was all mortal, and he himself was not more than a third divine!”

“That is the secret,” Ninsun said. “Through myriad years, he and his wife stayed alive, residing in Tilmun. There, in a secluded place they are hidden. A life-giving plant grows there, Gilgamesh. Whoever eats of its fruit is constantly rejuvenated, constantly postponing death. You must go there, Gilgamesh, for only this fruit can defy your malady!”

“And how shall I attain that distant goal, my mother?”

“I have a plan,” she said. “Come and I will show you.”

They went to the inner chamber where the altar was, where the disc tablets could be made to display their markings. Ninsun pressed the activating spot in the altar, and, as once before, its stone front vanished into the floor, exposing the shelves and the stored discs.

“I’ve wondered since the previous time how this magic altar works,” Gilgamesh said.

Ninsun chuckled. “You were a curious child and you haven’t changed.” She bent down and picked out one of the discs.

“My Tablet of Destinies!” Gilgamesh exclaimed, excitement in his voice.

“No, it’s a map of the place you are to go to and the route to it.”

“Let me see my tablet again,” Gilgamesh said. “Display its heavenly writing for my eyes to behold once more!”

“No, not now,” Ninsun retorted. She closed the altar’s front and put the disc she had chosen in the altar’s cavity. The whirring sound that Gilgamesh had heard once before was heard again and the disc began to radiate a golden glow. Ninsun touched the other activating spot, and the white sheet appeared from the side of the altar and moved slowly to cover the face of the disc. And, as before, the markings on it became visible. It was a map.

Ninsun used the pointing stick as she spoke. “Tilmun is shaped like a tongue. The Upper Sea forms its curving northern shores; two horns of water shape its shores on the east and on the west. At its

narrow tip, high mountains rise like giant teeth against the sky, their stones rich with veins of copper and turquoise. That southern part of Tilmun is the destination of Enkidu, there to toil with other condemned men in the bowels of the Earth, mining the precious veins."

"He doesn't know the verdict yet, but he had a dream about it," Gilgamesh said. "Has my prayer made him well, only to eat dust in the darkness? Without water he shall perish!"

"One step at a time," Ninsun told Gilgamesh. "Along the shores of the Upper Sea there runs a caravan route that connects the lands of the Lord Adad with Magan and the other lands of the Enkiites. To the route's south, hidden by a chain of mountains, lies a secret plain. It is the heart of the Fourth Region, forbidden to men. No mortal can enter the zone and live, for in its midst the Place of the Rocketships has been established." She pointed to the place with the stick. "That is where Ziusudra's secret abode is, where the Plant of Life grows."

"How shall I reach the place, enter it, and live?"

"There is a land route known only to the Anunnaki. Here, let me point it out to you. A river, the Falling River is its name, begins at lakes not far from the Cedar Mountain. From the mountains it flows down to an inland sea, the Sea of Salt. Where the sea begins and ends there are crossing points that connect to routes leading to Tilmun. Though desolate, this is the route you would take, were it not for Enkidu."

He looked at his mother, puzzled.

"Because of the sentence imposed on Enkidu, you shall take none of the land routes. Instead, you shall reach your destination by sea!"

"By sea?"

"Indeed. You will announce that, on account of your comradeship with Enkidu, you have decided to accompany him on his last journey. Ishtar, I hope, will be persuaded to permit it. You will obtain a boat of Magan that sails up the west coast of Tilmun." She pointed out the route with the pointer. "The ore port is here. You will drop off Enkidu there. But you yourself will not turn back. You will continue up the coast, not all the way to Magan, but to this point here. Remember it well, Gilgamesh, for the place is unknown to seafarers. There you

will bid good-bye to your crew and continue alone. They and the boat will await your return there, so make sure the boat has enough provisions."

"I follow you so far," he said. "What happens then?"

"From the shore, direct your steps eastward. There is a pass in the chain of mountains that surround the forbidden zone. Keep walking until the guardians of the Place of the Rocketships stop you. Tell them who you are and that you've come to meet Ziusudra, and they'll direct you to him."

"And they, and Ziusudra, will believe me?"

"Show them this," she said. She made the altar's front open up and took out two objects.

"My Tablet of Destinies, and another just like it!" Gilgamesh exclaimed.

"Yes, except that the perfect replica is different. On it, the markings are visible and the writing has been converted to that of the Edin, so that Ziusudra can read it. It is this replica that you'll take with you. The real tablet shall remain here, hidden in this altar."

"As you say, my mother," Gilgamesh said, and took the replica from her.

Ninsun was putting the authentic Tablet of Destinies back into its hiding place when a sharp noise startled them. She turned to look at the door, glimpsing a disappearing figure.

"It is someone with metal on him!" she shouted. "Quick, Gilgamesh, get hold of the eavesdropper!"

For a moment Gilgamesh stood uncomprehending. Then with long strides, he reached the adjoining room. There was no one there but the outer door was open. He ran out, unsure after whom. Outside the courtyard was already filled with people—the sick, the old, mothers with their youngsters—squatting, standing, milling about. Whoever it was that had entered Ninsun's private abode was now lost in the crowd. The compound's main gate was wide open, thronged with those who were trying to enter and those who were leaving.

Gilgamesh looked back. His mother was standing at the doorway.

“Whoever the intruder was,” he said as he returned to her, “he has vanished.”

“I wonder who it was,” Ninsun replied, “and what his purpose might have been.”

“Probably a beggar, seeking something to steal.”

“A beggar with metal upon him, stealing from a goddess?”

“Who knows?” Gilgamesh said. “Some people will stoop to anything if they can get away with it.”

“I wonder,” Ninsun said. “The attempt by Marduk and Nabu to capture you, Gilgamesh, showed that Erech is also a prize in the contest between the clans.”

“You haven’t told me how Nabu’s complaint was dealt with,” he said.

“Having claimed that they were only trying to rescue you and Enkidu, Utu had no counterclaim and had to apologize. But everyone knew that there’s more to the incident than meets the eye. Be careful on your journey, Gilgamesh. And what about your son while you’re gone? Would you like him to stay with me?”

“You’re truly concerned, my mother,” Gilgamesh said, kissing her hand. “I think Urnungal should stay in the palace, as befits the Crown Prince. Niglugal will keep an eye on him.”

“Niglugal. . . . How much can you trust him, Gilgamesh?”

“He has served me well, and before that, my father.”

“Yes, but your father was also Enkullab’s father. While you watch the intrigues in the temple, don’t lose sight of the palace, Gilgamesh!” She put her hand out and caressed his curly hair. “Now, let’s go and see how Enkidu is doing.”

In the place where he was resting, Enkidu was sound asleep. He was breathing steadily, rhythmically.

“He is recovering well,” Ninsun said.

“Who shall tell him his fate?” Gilgamesh asked. “To toil in the bowels of the Earth?”

“You, for it is you who shall take him there,” Ninsun replied.

12

Three days later Ninsun sent word to Gilgamesh that the great Lady Ishtar had granted her consent to the sea voyage by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and thereupon the palace was mobilized for the task at hand.

Emissaries were sent to Ur and Eridu to find a ship of Magan, one large and strong enough for the perilous journey. Striking a bargain with its captain, the ship was sailed upriver, then hauled by strong men from Erech who, using ropes, maneuvered the vessel into a canal outside the city.

There, the best carpenters and woodworkers strengthened the ship's keel with selected woods, imported from afar. They fitted her with new masts of straight tree trunks. Three-ply sails, sewed together by Erech's best seamstresses, were attached to these masts. The city's smiths were also kept busy fashioning strong weapons for the ship's crew, and a newly designed ax was especially fashioned for Gilgamesh. He called it the Might of Heroism weapon.

As these preparations progressed, Gilgamesh was a frequent visitor to the special quay where the ship was being outfitted. He went there escorted by a platoon of soldiers from the palace guard. It was usually commanded by a captain of the guard, but one day Gilgamesh asked Kaba, the commander of all of the troops, to accompany him.

Though youth was usually synonymous with soldiering, Kaba was an exception. His large and muscular body belied his age. Only his thick beard, carefully trimmed but all gray, and the many wrinkles in his sun-browned face, attested to his passed years. It was he, when Gilgamesh was still a boy, who had trained the king in the martial arts, and now he was training the son of Gilgamesh, the boy Urnungal.

“It’s a fine ship,” Kaba said after they had arrived at the quay and he was circling the ship, looking at it from all sides.

“It ought to be,” Gilgamesh replied. “It’s destined for a long and perilous journey. We will need a complement of fifty soldiers for it, Kaba, because a good part of the route hugs the Shagaz lands. Can you get that many as volunteers?”

“I will be the first one to volunteer,” Kaba said.

Gilgamesh put his hand on the troop commander’s shoulder. “No, not you, Kaba,” he said. “You have served my father, you have served me, and you might have to serve the next king, my son, Urnungal. Your place is here!”

“I don’t understand,” Kaba answered him. “The king is only taking Enkidu to his destination and returning. Niglugal can be regent temporarily.”

“Fate is unpredictable and the future is always full of surprises, my loyal Kaba. Can I count on you to guard Urnungal with your life and protect him no matter from where or by whom he is endangered?”

“On my life,” Kaba said.

Back at the palace Kaba summoned the troops. Of Enkidu’s journey to the Land of Mines he told them, asking for fifty volunteers. As many stepped forward, he turned some away. “Who has a house that has not been dedicated yet,” he said, “let him go to his house. Who has a mother that is widowed, let him be with his mother. Let him who has married but has no son yet, stay with his wife.”

Once those individuals had been eliminated, Kaba chose the best men from the remaining volunteers. He presented them to the king, who bestowed on each one of them the epithet “Heroic Son of Erech.” Then the armorers were called. They fitted each of the fifty heroes with a suit of armor made of dried and hardened leather and placed new weapons in their hands.

When all was ready, the fifty heroes, accompanied by multitudes of townspeople, went off to board the ship. They were followed by a caravan of carts laden with provisions of food, water, various wines, and oil for cooking and for light.

In the crowd there were many—especially women who were mothers or wives or sweethearts—who were crying as they saw their beloved ones marching off for a long and perilous journey. But the heroes were joyful, looking forward to the adventure, confident of overcoming every peril and foe, and assured of gallantry that scribes would record and schoolchildren would recite in days to come.

* * *

It was dusk when Gilgamesh came to speak to Enkidu about the voyage from which he would not return.

Although he had greatly recovered, he was still under Ninsun's care in the medical compound. Gilgamesh found him sitting on a wooden bench in the compound's small garden behind Ninsun's private abode. Enkidu was facing the setting sun as he heard the approaching footsteps. He looked up and saw Gilgamesh, and smiled.

"Gilgamesh, my comrade," he said softly, "I've been awaiting you."

"Here I am, my friend," Gilgamesh said. He took Enkidu's hand, as much to touch it as to check its subsided swellings.

"Have you come for me? Is it time to go?" Enkidu asked.

Gilgamesh was taken aback. "What kind of talk is this?"

Enkidu smiled wryly. "My comrade, let me speak the words that are choked inside your throat. I've seen a vision and am no longer terror-stricken. The gods' emissary has appeared to me in the vision, an image shimmering in the air in front of my very eyes, moving and speaking in broad daylight though no one was really there! I tell you, Gilgamesh, it was as though I was asleep and dreaming, but it wasn't night and I was wide awake!"

"I've heard of such apparitions. They are deemed a blessing."

"Perhaps. . . . My dream of the Winged Ones he explained to me, my fating to toil in the depths of the Earth he disclosed to me. That you would be my companion he assured me. But before I could ask him why you would also go and how we would journey, the apparition vanished and the vision was no more."

He stared at Gilgamesh, his sad eyes demanding an answer.

“The divine revelation cannot be denied,” Gilgamesh said. “But it is not on your journey that I will accompany you, but the other way around.”

“You speak in riddles,” Enkidu told his friend.

“Once I bring you to the appointed place, Enkidu, to Erech I shall not return. Instead, the journey I shall continue. To the Place of the Rocketships I aim to go, Enkidu. What we’ve failed to attain at the Landing Place, there in Tilmun I shall attain!”

Enkidu shook his head in disbelief. “It’s a foolhardy journey. You may risk your life for naught,” he said. He took his comrade’s hand. “My comrade, when the gods created mankind, they did not bestow mankind with unending life. Stay in Erech, and the many days still in your allotment will count as a blessing! Of each remaining day make a feast! Be merry, fill your belly, bathe in sparkling water, wear your royal garments, pay heed to the son that holds your hand! And as to death, pay no heed to it. When it comes, embrace it without fear!”

The hand of Gilgamesh jerked, and Enkidu stared at his comrade.

Gilgamesh pulled his hand back, but Enkidu held on to it firmly. “Something is the matter,” he said.

“I was going to tell you later,” Gilgamesh said, “but I might as well reveal my secret to you now. Though I’ve been spared a death sentence, my days, Enkidu, are numbered. I’ve touched a divine object, the handiwork of the great Lord Anu, and therefore have become accursed.” His hand jerked again. “There’s death in my bones, Enkidu. Therefore I am undertaking the journey to Tilmun. The great Healer, the Lady Ninharsag, to my mother a secret has revealed. A fruit that from death shields grows in Tilmun. If I can attain it, my days it will prolong.”

Enkidu eyed his comrade. “Were it not for this secret, I would have insisted that you desist from the foolhardy journey,” he said. “I’ve never heard of this fruit before, but if the great Lady Ninharsag knows of it, it must be true. Where is the place that it grows?”

“My mother has pointed it out to me on a map,” Gilgamesh said.

“A secret place of the gods?”

“It is beyond the place where we will put you ashore.”

“Well then,” Enkidu said. “Let me thank your mother for healing me, before it’s time to depart.”

* * *

An after-sunset darkness prevailed when the two were ushered by the handmaiden into Ninsun’s presence. She was sitting in her favorite armchair, wearing a garment made of fine lamb’s wool. A necklace of lapis lazuli adorned her chest and a tiara-like comb of ivory crowned her hair. Oil lamps cast their reddish golden lights upon her and threw shadows behind her.

The two bowed to the ground.

“I have been expecting you,” Ninsun said, and waved them in to sit in front of her.

“The time has come, divine mother,” Gilgamesh murmured.

“Great heavenly queen,” Enkidu said, “I’ve come to thank you and bid good-bye.”

“I have prayed to the great lords for both of you,” she said. “To the great Lord Anu who is in the Heavens, and to the great Lord Enlil who rules Earth, and to the Lord Utu who commands the Eagles. Now Gilgamesh, before you leave, go into the altar room and say your prayers too.”

Gilgamesh got up and went into the inner room. There was an eerie golden glow hovering like a mist above the altar. He knelt down before it, raised his hands, and spoke slowly and softly. “Oh great Anu, forgive my transgressions. Oh great Enlil, extend your mercy to me. Oh Utu, lord of the Eagles, spread your protecting wings over me. The Place of the Rocketships I wish to enter. Be my ally! Where the rocketships are raised, inscribe my name for life!”

He got up and returned into Ninsun’s presence. She bent down and kissed him on the forehead. Then she reached out and put her hand on Enkidu’s head.

“Be blessed, Enkidu,” she said. “Though prayers are not intended for your lips, mine shall not cease to utter your name. Perhaps one day the Lord Enki shall find a way to redeem your sentence.”

She motioned to them to get up. Gilgamesh grabbed his mother's hand and kissed it. She embraced him then pushed him away.

"You have not uttered a prayer to the Lady Ishtar," she said. "But she has been wronged by you on account of the Tablet of Destinies that for her was intended. After you are gone, I shall make amends to her."

"Not the tablet!" Gilgamesh began to say.

Ninsun raised her hand to hush him. "Go, and may the gods be with you," she said as she turned toward the inner room.

They could hear her sobbing. Gilgamesh took a step toward the other room, but Enkidu pulled him back.

"The die is cast," he said. "Let's go."

* * *

Compared to the banquets that used to be held in the palace, this last meal of the evening was solemn and austere. It was taking place not in the Great Hall but in the king's private quarters, and there was no merriment or singing or drinking of wine and beer. Rather, it featured quiet talk and the imbibing of just a little wine for better digestion.

Nor did palace notables, heroes, emissaries from near and far, and savants of varied knowledge join the king. This last evening before the fateful departure only four persons partook of the meal: Gilgamesh and Enkidu—who only drank water—and Niglugal and the king's only son, Urnungal. From the conversation and the exchanged glances, it was evident that the center of attention was the teenager among them.

"My son," Gilgamesh said when the meal was over and the servants were dismissed, "on a long and dangerous journey I am embarking on the morrow at dawn. This is not a hurried departure but one undertaken with great deliberation and preparation. A task imposed by a divine judgment I must perform. It is to accompany my brotherly comrade, Enkidu, to dwell henceforth in the Land of No Return."

"He will never return?" Urnungal asked. "That's absurd!"

“That is the judgment of the gods, on account of the slaying of the Bull of Heaven,” Gilgamesh said.

“I shall always think of you, Urnungal,” Enkidu said, extending his arms toward him, “and you can always keep me beside you in your mind’s eye. Recall our wrestling, the talks of the steppe and its creatures, the tales of godly magic. . . . Will you remember all that, Urnungal?”

The boy got up and approached Enkidu. He wore a simple, short robe—only its colored fringes indicated his noble standing. His black hair was as thick as a lion’s mane and his stature and broad shoulders were nearing those of his father. He held out his arm to Enkidu and the two locked arms in the manner of heroes.

“Enkidu,” the boy said, “of you I’ll tell tales till the end of my days!”

“That’s good enough for me!” Enkidu said and embraced Urnungal.

“And you, Father, when will you return?” Urnungal asked, turning to his father.

“It’s hard to predict,” Gilgamesh said, “for the journey is long and dangerous. . . .” His hand jerked as he spoke.

Urnungal took his father’s spasmed hand. “You’ve had this demon in your hand since the end of the New Year festival,” he observed. “Are you well, my father?”

“Of course!” Gilgamesh said, eying the others. “Just overexertion. Now, my son, some serious talk.” He motioned to his son, and the boy put his hands in his father’s hands. “Though you are not two-thirds divine as I am, the blood of gods flows in your veins, Urnungal. To kingship you were destined from the day you were born!”

“Urnungal is the Crown Prince!” Niglugal exclaimed.

“More than that,” Gilgamesh said without looking at Niglugal, instead focusing his gaze on Urnungal. “My son, from the moment I leave, you shall be not just the Crown Prince, but the Heir Apparent. Though young in years, a man you must be! Listen to the advice of Niglugal, consult my mother, Ninsun, then do what your heart tells you to do.”

“Wise words,” Niglugal said. “If only the boy were somewhat older . . .”

“Kingship is in his blood,” Gilgamesh replied, his eyes searching Niglugal’s.

Niglugal extended his arm and clasped it with Urnungal’s. “I will serve you as faithfully as I’ve been serving your father,” he told him.

There were tears in Urnungal’s eyes. Gilgamesh passed his fingers through his son’s thick black, curly hair.

“Just like your mother’s, black as a raven’s,” he said softly. Then he turned Urnungal around to face him. “My son, I wish you to hear this before I depart. Ever since your mother died I have been restless. Because of her absence beside me, the laps of many women I’ve shared. But there were always many, never one. None replaced her on the seat of royalty, nor in my heart. No one else as a spouse have I ever taken!”

“Thank you for telling me that,” Urnungal said, kissing his father on the cheek.

“Now go to your chambers and sleep as late as you wish,” Gilgamesh said.

Reluctant but obeying, Urnungal left, their eyes following him as he departed. Niglugal was the first to break the silence that followed.

“A sad farewell, as though the parting will be long. . . . You’ve said nothing of a regent, nor how long we should await your return, my king.”

Gilgamesh raised an eyebrow. “The next New Year festival, that’s the allotted time agreed with Ishtar. If by then I have not returned, Urnungal shall join the goddess in her bed and become king of Erech.”

Niglugal’s head jerked backward. “The boy would not be eighteen,” he said.

“He is the Heir Apparent!” Gilgamesh retorted. “Besides, you’re underestimating Ishtar’s abilities . . .”

Enkidu burst in laughter. Niglugal smiled. “Never too early?” he asked.

“On this merry note, let’s retire for the night,” Gilgamesh said. “I’m going to my bedchamber, Enkidu. You can sleep wherever you wish. We leave in the morning.”

As the king and Niglugal left the chamber, Enkidu remained seated, a blank look in his eyes. “I see an eagle with spread wings, immobile in the sky, all the way on the horizon,” he whispered.

* * *

The departure of Gilgamesh and Enkidu was a subdued affair. Niglugal sent several runners along with the ship; they returned to Erech in succession to report the ship’s progress southward. On the seventh day the last runner returned, reporting that the ship had left Eridu and had sailed off into the Lower Sea. From thence on the ship and its passengers and crew were on their own, with no further word about its progress and fortunes expected until its return to the Edin.

In the palace the mood remained subdued. Urnungal, skipping weapons lessons, wandered about the palace aimlessly.

Niglugal summoned Kaba to his chamber. “The king Gilgamesh upon a hazardous journey has embarked,” he said, “leaving behind a restive population and a scheming High Priest.”

“I am aware of that,” Kaba said. “That’s why the king is counting on our loyalty.”

“Well-spoken, Kaba,” Niglugal said. “But what if the High Priest makes a move to depose the king in his absence?”

“Only the Lady Ishtar can do that,” Kaba said.

“The High Priest is not to be underestimated, Kaba. He could spread rumors, influence the goddess . . .”

“Deposing Gilgamesh will only put his son on the throne. Why should Enkullab do that?”

“Urnungal is just a boy,” Niglugal replied. “Maturity and experience may have to be called upon . . .”

Kaba stood up. “The king is barely gone.”

“I’m only thinking of *precautions,* Kaba. Just trying to be ready if *others* make a move. We do not need riots, upheavals, or disorder, do we?”

Kaba nodded in agreement.

“You understand that as chamberlain it is my duty and prerogative to conduct the royal affairs . . .” Niglugal paused. “However, if an

emergency arises, it will be my intention to constitute myself, the boy, and you as a council of regency. Agreed?"

Kaba shifted uneasily. "Agreed," he finally replied.

"Good," Niglugal said. "Now let your spies in the city and the temple sharpen their eyes and ears so that we face no surprises . . . And that includes Ninsun's House of Resuscitation."

"We removed the surveillance there yesterday. After news of the ship's passage beyond Eridu was received, the goddess moved to her abode in the Sacred Precinct."

"I see," Niglugal said. "Let your men keep an eye on her there, then."

* * *

It was on the following day that a young priest rushed into Ninsun's quarters with a request from the High Priest that she come quickly to succor a priest of high standing.

It was a most unusual request, and Ninsun suggested that the sick priest be taken to the House of Resuscitation, where she would examine him when she treated the other patients. But the young priest was persistent.

"It's a malady most peculiar that has seized him," he said. "An uncommon plague. . . . No one will touch him, great lady, no one will enter his lodgings. Come quickly, before the plague spreads!"

Impressed by the young priest's genuine fear and excitement, Ninsun put on a shawl and followed him. Priests fell to their knees and bowed as she passed by their quarters. In a small hall she was met by the High Priest; instead of enmity, there was fear in his eyes. He bowed to the ground and kissed the hem of Ninsun's garment.

"A plague, a most unusual plague, has struck!" he said, his voice quaking. "The wrath of the great gods Anu and Enlil is upon this place! Save us, save us all!"

"Where is the maladied priest?" she asked curtly, looking at Enkullab with obvious disdain.

"He is Anubani, in there, through the doorway . . ."

She entered the semi-darkened room, its only light coming through lattices at the top of a wall near the ceiling. Anubani was lying on his back upon a wooden bed, half-naked. He was motionless, but his eyes followed Ninsun as she looked him over. There were large red spots all over his body; his hands were swollen and as red as fresh blood.

She touched his forehead, but surprisingly there was no fever. She touched his hand with her fingernail and the hand jerked. She turned his hands over to examine the palms; they were scarred as though burnt and the flesh was raw. She looked into Anubani's eyes but could see only extreme fear.

"Anubani," she said, "can you hear me?" He blinked his eyes.

"I can help you only if I am told the truth. . . . You were struck down after you carried an object in your hands?"

He blinked his eyes.

"A divine object?"

His lips twisted in an unspoken effort. Then he blinked again.

"What was it?"

He lay motionless, unresponding.

"Where is it? You will die unless I'm told!" Ninsun shouted.

He groaned a muted groan. His eyes shifted toward a corner of the room where a chest stood.

Ninsun went over and opened it. It was filled with household objects, clay tablets, and clothing. She threw them all on the floor as she searched the chest. At its bottom her hands felt a tightly wrapped package. She brought it out and unwrapped it.

"Great gods!" she exclaimed. She was holding the Tablet of Destinies! Incredulous, she turned the tablet over in her hands, looked carefully at it, and touched its surfaces. There could be no doubt. It was the Tablet of Destinies that had been hidden in her altar.

She returned to Anubani and held the tablet in front of his eyes, but he closed them in response.

"Look at me!" she commanded. "It is this tablet that you've stolen, that your profane hands have touched!"

He opened his eyes but did not move them.

“You stole it from my house, from inside the sacred altar!”

His eyes opened wider, and he groaned.

“I will make you well enough to talk,” Ninsun said as she wrapped the tablet back in the cloth.

She went to the doorway, where the other priests were huddled. “I need water,” she said. “Bring me three full pitchers and clean cloth . . . and send word at once to the palace to have some soldiers come over to carry this man to the House of Resuscitation.”

When the pitchers and cloth were brought, she placed a pitcher on each side of the bed and immersed Anubani’s hands in them. She dipped the cloth in the water of the third pitcher and sponged Anubani’s body. The treatments seemed to have a soothing effect on the priest, for he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Ninsun used the respite to look about the somber room. Its walls were bare, lacking any decoration. A small altar was set up in one corner, and there was the chest. Ninsun bent down to collect the items she had hastily thrown to the floor and began to put them back in the chest. She picked up a clay tablet with writing upon it, and was about to throw it into the chest too when she noticed that its seal impression seemed familiar. She took a closer look. It depicted a priest standing at an offering table before a seated goddess. The inscription read, “Enkullab, High Priest, servant of divine Ishtar.”

Ninsun wondered what such a tablet was doing in the possession of a priest but went on putting the priest’s belongings into the chest. In a moment she picked up a terra-cotta plaque. It bore the images of the emblems of Marduk and Nabu, and Ninsun was aghast!

Horrified she looked at Anubani. His eyes were still closed. Frantically Ninsun sought the inscribed tablet and, finding it again, took it to where the light was better. Her hands began to tremble as she read the inscribed text.

“Summon the Lady Ishtar!” she shouted toward the priests gathered at the doorway. “Let her come here at once!”

There was no immediate reaction to Ninsun’s command, then there were sounds of commotion and whispering. The High Priest

appeared at the doorway.

“This is highly unusual,” he said. “And you have not told us, great Healer, whether Anubani shall live or die.”

“It being highly unusual did not stop you from summoning me!” Ninsun said angrily. “The malady is very grave. If you don’t want the plague to spread, summon the Lady Ishtar at once!”

“So be it,” Enkullab said. He stepped back and ordered a priest to convey Ninsun’s wish to the goddess Ishtar.

It was some time before Ishtar appeared at the doorway. She was attired in her pilot’s garb, her ray-emitting baton in her hand. “Why have I been disturbed? Why have I been summoned to this dreary place? You’d better have a good explanation, Ninsun!” Ishtar said offensively as she entered the room.

She stopped short as she saw the immobile priest on his bed, his body covered with red spots, his hands soaking in the pitchers.

“Have you called me here so that I will contract the plague?” she demanded.

“It’s nothing that can harm you,” Ninsun calmly replied. She picked up the Tablet of Destinies for Ishtar to behold. “He was struck down having touched the handiwork of Anu.”

“Let me see this!” Ishtar said. She took the tablet and examined it. “It is indeed a Tablet of Destinies,” she said. “How did this priest come by it?”

“He didn’t say but I think I know,” Ninsun told her. “It was inside the handiwork of Anu that came down from the sky when the New Year festival ended.”

“Why would a priest of mine take such a sacred tablet into his possession?”

“Whether he is a priest of the Lady Ishtar is not certain,” Ninsun said. “I’ve found this among his belongings, in that chest.”

She handed Ishtar the terra-cotta plaque.

“The emblems of Marduk and Nabu!” Ishtar cried out. “My sworn enemies!”

Ninsun nodded. “A traitor, a spy within the Sacred Precinct.”

“Betraying his own goddess, his High Priest!”

“Of that too one cannot be certain,” Ninsun answered. “I’ve also found this hidden in the chest . . .” She handed Ishtar the inscribed tablet. “Better read it before you utter another word.”

Ishtar recognized at once the High Priest’s seal. Her hands began to shake with anger as she read the inscription. She glanced at Ninsun, who nodded her head toward the doorway, then she handed the three objects back to her.

“Let Enkullab come in, at once!” Ishtar commanded.

In a moment, the High Priest stepped hesitatingly into the room. He fell to his knees and bowed to Ishtar, then bowed his head toward Ninsun.

“Great lady, Mistress of Erech,” he said. “A plague has struck within the Sacred Precinct. There must be transgression about. . . . It will be atoned.”

“Who is this priest and how did he contract the plague?” Ishtar demanded, without motioning to the High Priest to get up.

“Anubani is his name, his task is handling supplies. An unimportant priest, little known to me personally,” Enkullab said. “His malady to me is a mystery, great lady. If the Lady Ninsun has a cure, surely he himself could tell us more?”

“He will be well enough to tell us more,” Ninsun said, looking at Ishtar.

“Until then,” Ishtar said, “perhaps *you* can explain this?” She reached for the plaque that Ninsun was holding and held it before Enkullab’s face.

“Sacrilege!” Enkullab shouted and covered his eyes with his hands.

“Indeed,” Ishtar replied. “How did this filth come to contaminate my own Sacred Precinct?”

“I should have known better,” Enkullab said quickly. “Word was brought to me that Anubani’s comings and goings were not common. But he was ordained into the priesthood at the seminary in Nippur and thus was considered beyond suspicion.”

“Indeed,” Ishtar said. “And what about this, then?” She took and held up the inscribed tablet. “This is your seal, isn’t it?”

Instinctively he touched the seal that hung from the leather string around his neck. “It is my seal,” he affirmed.

“And the message on the tablet, is it your message?”

She thrust the tablet into his hand. He shifted as though he would stand up, but Ishtar pressed her baton on his shoulder. “On your knees!” she ordered.

Staying on his knees, he began to read the tablet. After reading the first lines, his hands began to tremble and perspiration covered his forehead.

“It is not what it seems,” he said in a shaky voice. “*He* wrote it. Ask him!”

“Did he forge the seal, your signet?” Ishtar asked angrily.

“It’s all a mistake!” Enkullab pleaded. “It was he who sent word about Gilgamesh. . . . The intercepting was his idea!”

On his bed Anubani let out a muffled groan. They turned to look at him, in time to see his hands jerk so violently that one of the pitchers overturned, breaking into pieces, its water spilling on the floor. Ninsun bent over him, then stood up.

“He’ll never speak again,” she told them.

“It’s an omen!” Enkullab shouted. “The evil one was struck down! I have not betrayed you, my lady. Let the great Lord Anu be my witness!”

There was a commotion in the doorway. It was caused by a palace captain with several soldiers.

“We’ve been summoned to move a sick priest . . .” he began to say, then he saw the goddesses and fell to his knees. “Forgive me, I had not known . . .”

“The sick priest is dead,” Ishtar said. “Now get up and seize this one here.” She pointed her baton at Enkullab. “He is to be tried for treachery and treason.”

“No, it’s not so!” Enkullab cried, stretching out his trembling hands. “I am your most faithful servant. . . . It was Gilgamesh who was the sinner, not I!”

“Take him away before I turn him to vapor!” Ishtar shouted. “Take him to the White Temple and summon the priests and the Elders. Let

them witness the judgment of the great Lord Anu!”

Jumping to his feet, the captain put his hand on Enkullab’s shoulder. “Get up and come with us,” he said.

But instead of getting up, Enkullab prostrated himself on the floor.

“Get up!” the captain shouted. But Enkullab remained stretched out on the floor.

Ninsun bent over the High Priest. She touched him, then looked up at Ishtar.

“The Lord Anu’s judgment was swift,” she said. “The High Priest is dead.”

Ishtar looked at the dead Enkullab in disbelief. She turned her gaze to the lifeless body of Anubani. Then she stared at Ninsun, the captain, and the scattered objects on the wet floor.

“Why are you staring at me? Why are you all here?” she suddenly said loudly. “And what are all these filthy objects?”

She grabbed the plaque with the emblems of Marduk and Nabu on it and threw it to the floor, crushing it with her foot. “Get out, leave!” she yelled at them.

Ninsun hurried out, followed by the captain. Ishtar threw the inscribed tablet against the wall, smashing it to pieces.

“Traitors!” she shouted in rage. “Evildoers, filth!”

She stepped back toward the doorway and let a brilliant ray burst out of her baton. There was a thudding sound followed by a blaze. In a moment the whole room was on fire. Ishtar took a step backward, watching the flames engulf the body of Anubani, then that of Enkullab. Suddenly feeling the heat of the flames on her face, she turned and strode out of the building.

The priests and soldiers who had been inside were now outside, huddled in groups. They were soon joined by other priests who had begun to run out of the building. All could see smoke rising through the latticework of the ceiling of Anubani’s room, then flames.

“Let the fire cleanse this place of evil!” Ishtar shouted. “Let this place be burnt to the ground!”

The priests and the soldiers bowed low at these words.

Ishtar looked around the large courtyard. She saw Ninsun and strode over to face her. In her left hand Ishtar held the Tablet of Destinies, and she raised it for Ninsun to see. Her right hand held the Weapon of Brilliance and she pointed it at Ninsun.

“Now tell me about the Tablet of Destinies,” she said.

“Gilgamesh found it inside the handiwork of Anu, on the night of the falling stars,” Ninsun said. She spoke calmly, measuring her words. “He thought it was an omen from Anu meant for him. Being two-thirds divine, he was entitled . . .”

“*Was* it an omen for him?” Ishtar interjected.

“No . . . it was a message meant for you. I was going to give it to you once Gilgamesh was safely on his journey.”

“I can’t believe my own ears!” Ishtar said angrily. “First your son snatched a divine object not intended for him, then you dared keep from me Anu’s message?”

“It was all for the sake of Gilgamesh,” Ninsun said, bowing her head.

“Damn you and damn your son!” Ishtar shouted, pointing the baton at Ninsun.

“Punish me, but let Gilgamesh live,” Ninsun implored, raising her eyes to face Ishtar.

Ishtar hesitated, then lowered her weapon. “This shall be the punishment,” she said. “Doomed to remain on Earth, you shall see Gilgamesh forever seeking life and never finding it!”

And having spoken thus, she turned and walked away.

13

It was about the time that Enkullab, the High Priest, was struck down by the unseen hand of the Lord of Heaven that a peculiar sight appeared to those aboard the king's ship.

Until then the sailing had been uneventful—except for the thrill and novelty of finding oneself upon the surface of seemingly endless waters, with no land to be seen on either side. This was an experience and a sight never before encountered by Gilgamesh or Enkidu or the fifty heroes that accompanied them. The latter had burst into song as the ship left the marshes of Eridu and entered the Lower Sea proper, and Gilgamesh, recalling his own youthful days, joined in. Then, as the winds died down from time to time and the heroes had to lend the sailors a hand and help with the rowing, a routine of sorts settled upon the passengers and the crew. To relieve it, Gilgamesh organized weapons exercises, and Enkidu, though generally subdued and unparticipating, obliged by giving wrestling lessons.

And so, as night followed day and day followed night, the ship made good progress southward.

The ship's former owner, Lugulbal by name, who had been retained to continue as the ship's captain and navigator, occasionally sailed the ship closer to the right-hand shore to get his bearings. He explained that they were going to follow the contours of the Land of the Shagaz, first in the Lower Sea until they had reached the spot where its lips came together, then parallel to the coastline until the Sea of the Ancients was reached. Then, he said, they would sail with the rising sun, not on their left as in the beginning, but on their right. At the tip of the Sea of the Ancients, he said, lay Magan. Toward the end of the voyage, on their right, they would sail by Tilmun. There, he warned, one should not linger at all, and if Enkidu must be let off, it should be done right after sunrise, when the spirits of the dead and the demons of the condemned gods take their rest.

It was on one of these approaches to the coastline—at about the time the fateful events were taking place in Erech—that the skies were suddenly filled with heavy clouds, which cast dark shadows upon the ship. Usually such clouds, the captain explained, augured the approach of a storm. But this time, even the breezes that filled the ship's sails died down, and an eerie silence settled upon the sea.

"By the great lords!" Lugulbal said, "I've never seen such a contrary sight. . . . Storm clouds in the sky, a death stillness upon the waters." He ordered the crew and heroes to take to the oars. "Let's move closer to land. We might be safer there."

But as they began to row their fear grew, for as the ship moved closer to the shore the heavy clouds seemed to move likewise, so that the dark shadows continued to engulf the ship. A distance away, in all directions, they could see the sun's bright rays playing upon the waters. However, the ship, even as it moved, was under the darkness. The sound of the rowing was also peculiar, for the oars, as they entered and left the water, made hardly a splashing sound.

"By the great lords!" Lugulbal said. "A demon is swallowing the sounds!"

"Take us back into the midst of the sea," Enkidu, who had spoken little until then, suddenly said.

"We are almost near the beach, let us anchor and be near the safety of land," Lugulbal said, pointing with his hand. And indeed they were near the flat coast.

"I see a man!" the lookout, who had climbed up one of the masts, shouted.

They looked in the direction indicated by him. Up ahead to their left a promontory arose from the flatness of the coastline, and upon it they could see the silhouette of a man. He was tall and broad, his immense body covered with a black wrap. The closer they came, the larger the man looked. He wore an odd-shaped helmet, the likes of which none of them had seen before; it covered most of his face.

"It's a giant!" one of the heroes cried out.

"It's a demon!" shouted one of the sailors.

"It's a god, not a man," Enkidu said.

“Stop the rowing! Don’t come closer to the coast!” Lugulbul ordered.

Abandoning the oars, everyone crowded the deck, straining to view the strange apparition. The stillness was still all around them; the sea was calm, the sails hung limp—with not even a breeze to fill them. The man, or whosoever he was, stood atop the promontory, as still as a statue.

The gods’ fear in them, some of the sailors fell to their knees and began to pray for their lives. “We are doomed! We are doomed!” they began to shout, ignoring the captain’s commands to stop hollering. The heroes, filled with apprehension, looked at Gilgamesh, seeking his reassurance, his leadership.

“By the life of Ninsun, my mother who gave birth to me!” Gilgamesh said loudly for all to hear, “have I become as a child who sits bewildered at his mother’s knee? By the life of my forefather Lugalbanda, hero of heroes! Give me my weapon and I will fight this man, if a man he be, or this god, if a god he is!”

But even before Gilgamesh’s armor and weapons could be fetched for him, the lookout cried out again: “Look! Look! He . . . the man . . .” He was lost for words, but his cry alerted them to set their eyes on the promontory. There, the being threw off his mantle, revealing a pair of wings. In each of his hands he held a circular object by its handle. His upper body was bare; its lower part was covered with a tight-fitting garment.

As they all stood dumbfounded on the deck, the Winged Being turned the object in his right hand. They could see a brightness rushing out of it, and in an instant the ship was awash in a sunlike glare. Then the brightness dimmed, and the Winged Being turned the object in his left hand. A brightness similar to the first one engulfed the ship. Then as it dimmed, the initial light flared up once more. Again and again the two brightnesses replaced each other, and as they did, the ship began to turn slowly, then faster and faster, until it was in a dizzying spin.

As the ropes and gear and bags and jars began to churn about, all who were on board had to hold on to something lest they be thrown about. There were shouts of fear and helplessness as sailors and

heroes fell and hurt themselves. Holding on to each other and to the ship's masts, Gilgamesh and Enkidu tried to stand steady, even as the ship spun faster and faster, drawn ever closer to the shore as it did so.

"It's a whirlwind!" Gilgamesh shouted to Enkidu.

"A whirlwind not of sand but of water!" Enkidu shouted back. "The water is rising!"

He let go of the mast with one hand and pointed to the sea. Gilgamesh looked in amazement. All around the spinning ship the water was rising!

"The ship is sinking!" Enkidu shouted. "Jump! Jump off the ship!"

Lest Gilgamesh did not understand him, Enkidu gestured with his hands. But having let go of his hold, Enkidu was now tossed away and immediately caught in the whirling pile of objects and men. Trying to catch his comrade, Gilgamesh also let go of his hold and was at once caught by the whirlwind. He flailed his hands aimlessly until he felt Enkidu's strong hand catching him by the arm. They were a few steps away from the ship's side, and with a mighty shove, Enkidu pushed the mass of tangled people, objects, and debris out of his way, pulling Gilgamesh with him. The water was already at the deck's level when Enkidu jumped off, still holding on firmly to Gilgamesh.

"Swim away!" Enkidu shouted, striking the water with his free hand.

"I can't!" Gilgamesh shouted back. "The water is pulling me down!"

For a moment they were both below the surface, but Enkidu's mighty strokes pulled them up for a gasp of air. Again and again they sank, only to be pulled up by Enkidu. Then, abruptly, the pull of the water stopped, and all was serene.

They looked about them. The ship was not to be seen. They dived and saw that it had sunk to the bottom. In the clear water they could see its sailors and the heroes entangled in the ropes and debris, floating in grotesque positions, their eyes wide open as though they were still alive. But they were all dead.

Ascending to the surface of the sea, Enkidu tugged at Gilgamesh and they began to swim toward the shore. It was not as near as it

had seemed from the ship's deck, but they finally reached it.

They lay on the yellow sand, exhausted and speechless for a while. Then Gilgamesh, feeling stronger, got up to survey the place. The beach stretched endlessly in both directions as far as the eye could see. The sea was calm, the clouds were gone, a breeze was blowing gently. He turned to survey the land. Some distance from the shore sand dunes arose, and somewhat to the left he could see the promontory on which the demon had stood.

"The Winged One, the demon, is gone," he said to Enkidu.

Enkidu did not respond. Gilgamesh came over to him. Unlike Gilgamesh, he still lay exhausted. His lips were moving, but instead of speaking, he was repeatedly spitting.

"What ails you?" Gilgamesh asked.

Enkidu spat again and again. "There was salt in the water," he murmured.

"Salty and bitter, not at all like the waters of our land," Gilgamesh said.

"It's my undoing, Gilgamesh!" Enkidu groaned. "My creator, the Lord Enki, warned me. 'Touch not salt to your lips, for it will be your undoing!' he said!"

"I'll look about for some sweet water to wash your lips," Gilgamesh told his friend.

He returned to the beach but nothing had washed ashore from the sunken ship. He climbed the sand dunes but all he could see beyond was a wilderness. There were bushes growing atop the dunes, bearing a grape-like fruit, and on tasting it Gilgamesh found it edible and juicy. He ate some and brought some to Enkidu, squeezing the juice into his comrade's mouth. Swallowing the juice made Enkidu feel somewhat better.

"Who could have done this evil thing?" Gilgamesh wondered.

"Whoever pursued us when we sailed up the river," Enkidu said.

"Each time you leave Erech, each time you journey in search of Everlife, your ship is attacked! Go back, Gilgamesh, accept that to which man is fated!"

“Defeat I will not accept,” Gilgamesh said. “To the Place of the Rocketships I shall journey, even if I have to walk there! And you, Enkidu, shall march there with me!”

Enkidu raised his arm weakly. “Go back,” he said, pointing in the direction they had come. “As for me, my muscles are melting, my innards are burning down, weakness attacks my limbs. . . . This is my end, Gilgamesh.”

Enkidu nodded his head as he spoke. His body began to shake uncontrollably. Gilgamesh embraced him. There was fear in Enkidu’s eyes.

“Fear not, Enkidu!” Gilgamesh said, “for I will summon the help of the Lord Utu!” He put his hand to his neck to bring out the stone that whispers, but there was nothing hanging from the cord. Frantic, Gilgamesh searched inside his clothes, then threw them off to better search. The Tablet of Destinies, stuck well into an inside pocket, was there—but not the stone that whispers.

“It must have been torn off during the whirlwind,” Gilgamesh said.

Enkidu’s eyes followed the frantic searches. “Let me pray to your Lord Utu,” he said, “with or without the stone.” He turned his face heavenward. “Oh great lord, bright Shamash, protector of those who journey. A mother who gives birth I had none, a father did not engender me. In a chamber I had been created artfully by the Lord Enki. . . . If my fate has come to devour me, my end I shall face in peace. But as for Gilgamesh, my comrade, the Lady Ninsun to him gave birth, and you were his godfather! Give him the Everlife to which he is entitled!”

Gilgamesh felt a squeezing in his heart. “Oh my friend,” he said. “My true and loyal comrade!”

But Enkidu no longer heard him, for a coma had seized him. His shivering ceased and he lay stiff and still. His eyes were open, bulging, and immobile. Death was devouring him from within.

“Enkidu!” Gilgamesh cried out. “You have conquered with me the most awesome creatures, you have scaled with me the mountains! Don’t yield to the demon that devours you! Fight, fight back!”

But Enkidu lay still. Gilgamesh lifted his comrade’s head; it fell limply back. He touched his heart; there was no beat. Enkidu was

dead.

For seven days and seven nights Gilgamesh mourned Enkidu, unwilling to accept this fate. Only when he saw a worm fall out of his comrade's nostril did he bow to the will of Namtar, the bringer of death. He gathered stones and pebbles and covered Enkidu's lifeless body with them.

"Let this be your tomb, a monument to a fallen hero," he said. Then he sat down and wept bitterly.

"When I die, shall I be like Enkidu, with a worm in my nostrils?" he cried out, with no one to answer.

* * *

Gilgamesh wandered away from the shore that day. At night he lay awake, gazing at the star-filled skies. Not having been trained in the priesthood, he knew little of the ways of the Heavens. Which was the star of Anu and which of Ishtar? He did not know. The Moon, which stood in the Heavens for Sin, the father of Utu, was the only celestial god of the night that he recognized. After a while it occurred to Gilgamesh that this too had a meaning: the House of Sin, whose offspring were Ishtar and her nightly star and Utu and his sun that ruled the day, would accept his prayers and grant him protection.

He uttered to them a short prayer. "Great lords of Heaven and Earth, let me not perish in the wasteland. Give me the strength to continue on my journey, and show me the way to the Place of the Rocketships that I may meet my ancestor Ziusudra!"

Having said his prayer, a peaceful fatigue settled over him and he slept through the night. He awakened to see the sun rising, indicating where east was. His prayers, Gilgamesh knew, had been answered. Utu, traveling in the skies westward, had just indicated to him the way to Tilmun.

He uprooted the largest bush he could find and from its stem he made himself a walking stick. From a shorter branch he made another stick on which, balanced on his shoulders, he hung as many clusters of the grapelike fruit as he could. The experience he had gained on his previous journey in the wilderness with Enkidu was of vital help to him now. He followed the ravines, knowing that he could

find subterranean water below their dry beds. He ate berries of all kinds. The wilderness, teeming with life especially at night, supplied rodents that he killed with a blow and ate the raw flesh. He found rest by day in the shadow of boulders, and advanced toward his goal by night, constantly seeing in his mind the map his mother had shown him of the land route to Tilmun.

The terrain, undulating sand dunes near the sea, changed its shapes and colors to reddish rocks as he progressed. He reached and climbed mountains of gray and black formations and found in their midst streams of sweet water from which he drank his fill and in which he bathed, giving relief to his swollen feet and his dried-out skin.

The life around him was also changing. In addition to rodents and snakes and lizards and scorpions he could now see hares and small mountain goats, and the wolves and jackals that preyed on them. And he also began to see wild deer and antelopes and gazelles, and the wild leopards and panthers that preyed on *them*—and the lions that mastered them all.

The paths he trod were unbeaten, the mountains he climbed were unnamed. The days that had passed he stopped counting. Then one day he saw in the distance a caravan of camels, and fearing they were Shagaz people, he hid that they should not see him. But he realized he was nearing human habitations and that the crossing of the wilderness on foot would soon be accomplished.

He saw in the distance a mountain pass, and set his course toward it. But before he had reached it, he heard the roaring of lions. He hid against a boulder, but the lions had seen him; a male and a female they were. He pulled out his dagger to defend himself as the female strained upon her hind legs to jump on him, but he stumbled and fell backward and the lioness missed him, landing just beside him. With all the strength in him, Gilgamesh stuck his dagger into her heart as she rolled on her side to get up. The animal let out an anguished roar and fell dead.

Now the male lion was upon Gilgamesh. He was weaponless, for his dagger remained stuck in the lioness. His hand found a rock and

he hit the lion between the eyes with it, then wrestled the animal with his bare hands just as Enkidu had taught him to do.

The animal bit and scratched him, but he locked his hands around its neck and did not let go no matter how much the lion writhed and twisted. Tighter and tighter he pressed his hold around the beast's neck, until he strangled it.

He stood up and viewed the two dead beasts, immense in size. *Now, I am king of the wilderness,* he said to himself. He pulled the dagger out of the dead lioness, then he skinned her and of her majestic skin, he made himself a coat. Ravens and other wild birds began to fill the sky above the place, and he decided to move on.

At the mountain pass he saw heaped stones supporting a stone column on which the symbol of the crescent was carved, and he realized that he had reached the domain of the Lord Sin. He had crossed the Land of the Shagaz and the dominions of Marduk!

He made the place his overnight station. As he slept he had a dream: He was in the midst of a celebration—people were singing and dancing, rejoicing in life. When he awoke, he knew that the dream was a good omen. He added a stone to the pile of stones supporting the column, and saying a silent prayer to the Lords Sin and Utu, proceeded through the mountain pass.

Now he could see from the heights a great plain below. Red-hued mountains contained a greenish body of water. Through the haze rising from the vast lake he could see the image of a walled city, its whiteness shimmering in the distance. Recalling his mother's map, he knew that he had reached the Sea of Salt, where passes could lead him to Tilmun.

The descent was hotter and more arduous than he had expected. The mountains sloped steeply toward the inland sea, which seemed to be even lower than it had initially seemed. The birds that had been so conspicuous in the mountains were absent here, and Gilgamesh realized that the place was immersed in an eerie silence, unbroken by the cries of birds or beasts. The haze rising from the waters was now as thick as vapor, and the sun, directly overhead, was beating on his head a deadly heat.

A great fear seized Gilgamesh, for he felt as though he was descending into the netherworld. The fear made him quicken his steps. He was at the foot of the mountains, at the beginning of the plain. In the heat and vapor he could no longer see the city. But as he advanced, he suddenly saw a house, standing all alone, surrounded by clusters of date palms.

Exhilarated by the sight, Gilgamesh directed his steps toward the house. As he neared it, he noticed a woman seated on a stool outside. She was eating from a bowl and taking sips from a jug. There were goats and pigs about.

“Oh woman!” Gilgamesh shouted as his stride turned into a run. “Is there beer in your jug, porridge in your bowl?”

The woman was startled to hear the shouted words. She looked up and was scared by the sight that she saw: an animal-clad man holding a long staff in his hand, his hair grown wild, his beard long and unkempt, his face dark as clay, and his nails as long and sharp as that of an eagle’s. She uttered a cry of fear and ran into the house, bolting the door behind her.

“Oh woman!” Gilgamesh shouted, as he came to the door. “Be not afraid! I am a wayfarer from afar. My belly has shrunk. Let me sip of your beer and taste of your porridge and I’ll be on my way!”

“Go away, beastly man!” the woman shouted from behind the door. “Go back to your wilderness!”

Only then did Gilgamesh realize how horrible he looked. He threw off the lion’s skin and with his hands straightened out his hair and beard as best as he could. Then he knocked with his staff on the door.

“Woman!” he said loudly, “I am neither beastly nor a dweller of the wilderness. I am Gilgamesh, king of Erech!”

There was silence behind the door, and Gilgamesh knocked more forcefully on it. “Open up, or I’ll smash your door!” he shouted.

“Of Gilgamesh and his exploits in the Cedar Forest many tales are told,” the woman answered from behind the locked door. “If Gilgamesh you are, tell me the name of the forest’s watchman, the nature of the slain beast!”

“I am he who vanquished Huwawa, the forest’s guardian, and slew the Bull of Heaven. I am Gilgamesh!”

“Why then are your cheeks wasted and your face sunken? Why are you here?”

“Open up and save me from starvation,” Gilgamesh told her, “if you want to know my tale.”

Carefully the woman opened the door. She looked him over again, then she let him in. She poured water on his hands so that he could wash his face, then gave him goat milk to drink. She served him porridge and he satisfied his hunger. Then she brought out a jug of ale, and sipping it with a straw, he quenched his thirst.

“I am Siduri,” she said, “the ale woman. I have lived here by myself ever since I was widowed. Now tell me your story.”

“I am Gilgamesh, king of Erech, a great city in the Edin. In my city, Man dies. ‘Man, the tallest, cannot reach the Heavens, and Life the gods have kept for themselves,’ so the saying goes. But I, Gilgamesh, am two-thirds divine. The offspring of the Lord Utu I am, the son of divine Ninsun . . .”

He fell silent, sinking into unspoken memories.

“Go on,” Siduri said. “You promised me the whole story.”

“The gods sent me a comrade, a valiant companion. Enkidu he was called, for the Lord Enki had artfully created him. But even he met mankind’s fate! Since his passing, I’ve found no rest. I’ve roamed the steppe and crossed the wilderness.” He paused again. “Now that you’ve heard my story, ale woman, my appearance you can understand.”

“Your appearance but not your roaming,” Siduri replied, staring at him. “How long is it since you bathed your body, washed your head, worn clean garments . . . felt warmth in your bed?”

For the first time since his ship had sunk, Gilgamesh chuckled. “I will share your bed, Siduri, but not for long. There’s a purpose to my roaming. In search of a forefather, Ziusudra he’s called, I’ve come this way. I wish to speak to him about Everlife.”

“Where is this man whom you call Ziusudra, and how will you reach him?”

“In Tilmun,” Gilgamesh said. “I was to reach that land by ship, but she sunk. I’ve since made my way on foot. . . . I’ve seen a city in the distance. Its merchants must have caravans?”

“That city is called Moon-City. To the Lord Sin it was dedicated, but its people have been converted to the worship of Marduk. To those who remained faithful to the House of Sin, a choice was given: leave or die! My husband and I built this house, for seeds grow here that turn the juice of the dates into ale. Even after he died, I went on living here, an outcast. And yet the townspeople come here for my ale, giving me my necessities in exchange.”

“If the people have converted to the worship of Marduk,” Gilgamesh said, “they are anathema to me. I must find another way to cross the sea and reach the land beyond it.”

“Never was there a mortal who could achieve that,” Siduri told him. She opened the door and pointed to the shimmering waters. “It is a Sea of Death; nothing can stay alive in it. And the mountains surrounding it are barren too, like an oven by day and a freezing death by night. The wilderness that you crossed is like a teeming garden in comparison.” She turned to face him. “Why don’t you stay here, Gilgamesh? Be my spouse, and let me delight in a little one!”

Gilgamesh had his gaze fixed upon the silent sea. “There must be a way to cross it,” he murmured. “A raft . . .”

Siduri took his hand in hers. “Stay here for a while, and a secret I’ll tell you.”

“Woman!” Gilgamesh cried out. “I will stay with you a sevenful if you show me a way to cross the sea!”

She took his hand and pressed it on her bosom. “A child, a little one to hold my hand. . . . You’ll stay long enough for me to conceive?”

Touching her bosom aroused in Gilgamesh a warmth as he had not known for many months.

He put his hands around her waist. “Tell me the secret and I will grant your wish.”

“The waters are indeed waters of death,” she said, “and no one has ever arrived from across the sea . . . except for Urshanabi.”

“Urshanabi?”

“The boatman of those who live forever. He has rocks that float and he crosses the sea without touching the water. Once a month, when the moon is fully bright, he comes over. He brings me beads of turquoise and carnelian; I give him goat milk and ale. Stay with me, Gilgamesh, until he comes. Let him see your face. Should he like you, he will take you across.”

“So be it,” Gilgamesh replied. “Now come, help me wash and trim my hair and beard and cut my nails, that I should be a fitting mate for your loins.”

“For that you’ll have to undress,” she said, and broke into laughter.

* * *

On the appointed day, Urshanabi arrived. He was short and broad-shouldered and in a way he reminded Gilgamesh of Enkidu. But his hands, though muscled, were thinner and he was older than anyone Gilgamesh had ever seen. His hair and long beard were all white, like the purest silver. He brought for Siduri beads of translucent carnelian and green-blue turquoise, and said not a word.

“This is Gilgamesh, king of Erech,” Siduri said as Gilgamesh stepped to the door. Urshanabi said nothing.

“I have come this way to behold my forefather Ziusudra,” Gilgamesh said. “I ranged and wandered over lands without count; I traversed difficult mountains that have no name. My body was not sated with sweet sleep; I fretted myself with wakefulness. I filled my joints with misery. My clothing was used up. I slew the bear and the hyena and the panther. Of the creeping things of wilderness I ate; of the flesh of the stag and the ibex I had my share. Then I killed the lions. I ate their flesh and their skins I wrapped about me as a mantle . . .”

“Why?” Urshanabi interrupted him.

“Man dies,” Gilgamesh said, “but Ziusudra has not died. This is the matter I wish to discuss with him, for I too do not intend to die!”

“He is the son of Ninsun the goddess; the Lord Utu is his forefather,” Siduri interjected when Urshanabi kept quiet. “He is two-thirds divine.”

“Why then do you seek Ziusudra?” Urshanabi asked, puzzled.

“That is what has been fated for me,” Gilgamesh replied. He took out of his garment the Tablet of Destinies. “It is the handiwork of the Lord of Lords, the great Anu,” he said.

The two looked at the curious object. “What do the markings mean?” Siduri asked.

“They depict the route to Heaven,” Gilgamesh answered.

“Why then do you seek Ziusudra?” Urshanabi asked again.

“He knows the secret of being taken aloft by the gods,” Gilgamesh said. “You speak as though you know of him . . .”

“Perhaps,” Urshanabi replied.

“If you do, show me the way!” Gilgamesh exclaimed. “I am divine offspring, I tell you! Here, look at my hands!” He held his hands out so that they could see the scar of the sixth finger.

“By the great gods!” Siduri said, awed. “He is one of the Healers, and with a child by him I am blessed!”

Urshanabi examined the king’s extended hands and nodded his head.

“Since time is remembered,” he said, “none dared cross the sea. Poisonous is the place of departure, and so is the place of arriving, and in between stretch the waters of death. But being two-thirds divine, you might survive the crossing. There are stones that float on the shore, black as the darkest night. You must tread on them between shore and boat. Then, as we sail, I will row, and you with long poles shall propel the boat. But make sure your hands don’t touch the water, for death is in it.”

“I understand,” Gilgamesh replied.

“Come then, let us go,” Urshanabi said.

Siduri put some porridge in a bowl and ale in a jar and handed them to Gilgamesh. “Will you come back?” she asked. “Will you see your child?”

“I shall go where I am fated to go,” Gilgamesh said, and he left with Urshanabi.

14

Careful to step only on the stones that floated, Gilgamesh followed Urshanabi into the boat. Its keel was shaped like a crescent and it had but one seat, for the one who rows. Urshanabi sat down and took hold of the oars, nodding toward two long poles with which the boat was also provided.

“Sailing by myself,” Urshanabi said, “I cut across the sea, arriving on the other side by nightfall. But with a passenger, the oars alone won’t do. You’ll have to heave-ho with a pole, and we’ll have to hug the shoreline so that you can make contact with the bottom. How long we’ll be sailing will depend on how mightily you push.”

Gilgamesh examined the poles. They were wooden and unusually straight and long. He wondered why the boat was equipped with them.

“I thought no one beside you crosses the waters,” he said.

“I am only a boatman,” Urshanabi answered. “Give us a shove and let’s sail away.”

They journeyed the whole day, hugging the shoreline. The sun, until it set, beat on them mercilessly. Urshanabi was silent the whole time, only grimacing now and again to show his annoyance at the slow progress.

“Alone, I would have been across by now,” he finally said. “We’ll anchor here for the night.”

They tied up to a large boulder protruding from the water. Urshanabi fell asleep right away, but Gilgamesh lay awake most of the night. While he slept he had no dreams, and thus no omens of what was in store for him.

In the morning they resumed the journey. Urshanabi, grumbling to himself, stood up from time to time to peer into the distance. Realizing that his host’s patience was running out, Gilgamesh began to push harder on the poles. He also tried to do it faster, counting the

shoves out loud: “One and second, three and fourth, five and sixth . . .” On the twenty-sixth shove the pole broke.

Urshanabi looked at Gilgamesh, despair in his eyes, saying nothing.

Gilgamesh was about to pick up the second pole when, feeling a breeze and seeing the waves, an idea occurred to him. Taking off his garment, he held the cloth aloft with spread hands, thus creating a makeshift sail. It took him a few moments to position the sail correctly, but then the breeze filled up the cloth and the boat began to move.

Urshanabi smiled and abandoned the coastline, directing the boat straight across the sea. By nightfall they had reached the other side.

“A course of a month and fifteen days it would have been by land, if you could ever make it,” Urshanabi said. “We’ll stay here the night, but you must leave me in the morning.”

“I thank you,” Gilgamesh said, “and the gods will bless you too. Now tell me, Urshanabi, which way shall I go from here?”

“Go in the direction of the setting sun,” Urshanabi told him. “After a three-day march, you will reach the Portals of Heaven, as some call them. They are stone columns erected as a gate. A path leads from there westward, toward the city of Itla and the great sea beyond. Turn left and pass through the portal, and your feet shall bring you to a range of mountains. Seven are its peaks and six are its passes. They surround the plain where the rocketships ascend and descend. But be forewarned! The passes are guarded by godlike beings. Their terror is awesome, their glance is death. Their dreaded beam sweeps the mountains and its touch makes mortals melt away!”

“I am no mortal, I am two-thirds divine,” Gilgamesh said. “To seek out Ziusudra, to reach the Place of the Rocketships, I am determined!”

“Do as you please,” Urshanabi said. “I will sail off again on the next full moon. Be here if you wish to cross back with me.” Having said that, he left Gilgamesh on the shore and went alone to spend the night in the boat.

It did not take Gilgamesh long to fall asleep. Dreams came to him at night, visions of skyships and falling stars. He awoke fully rested

at sunrise.

The boat and Urshanabi were gone.

Gilgamesh cast his eyes about him. Except for the shimmering sea, there was utter desolation in every direction. He sat down, completely disheartened, and tears came to his eyes. Had he been fooled by the old man Urshanabi? And come to think of it, who was Urshanabi and what was he doing in this wilderness?

Thirst and hunger jolted Gilgamesh out of his gloomy thoughts. He ate and drank of the provisions Siduri had given him, leaving some for another meal. The sun was moving in the skies and Gilgamesh decided to follow its course, as Urshanabi had indicated.

On the third day Gilgamesh saw the Portals of Heaven. The two columns, connected by a horizontal lintel stone, indeed stood as a gate. As he neared the portal he saw that there was a carving on the lintel stone, that of a Winged Disc. It was the emblem of Nibiru, the home planet of the gods.

On the western horizon the sun was setting, reddening the skies. In that direction, according to Urshanabi, lay the city of Itla. *A city! Houses, temples, people, food, even a bed to sleep in! Should he abandon his risky search and go there or keep on seeking his fate in the wilderness?* Gilgamesh knew not what to do, and he wished Utu would send him an omen.

He found a large stone and made it his pillow, and lay down for the night by the mute stone columns.

He was awakened in the morning by the cries of an eagle. It flew about the sky in great circles, crying to an unseen mate. Soon it must have noticed Gilgamesh, for it flew down and after circling the place where he was, landed atop the portal. It eyed Gilgamesh for a few moments then took off again, this time straight toward the mountain range that rose beyond the portal.

Gilgamesh watched the giant bird until it disappeared, and then he knew that it was an omen from Utu, the commander of the Eagles. He raised his hands in prayer. “Oh Utu, great lord,” he said, “establish your protection over me, let me walk in the shade of your wings! Bring me safely to the Place of the Rocketships, let me find Ziusudra!”

Then he stepped gingerly through the portalled gate, and set his steps toward the mountain range.

The terrain he was covering by an unbeaten path sloped higher and higher as he advanced, and the ground changed from sand and gravel to one of stones and rocks. By noontime, when the sun was right above him, he found shade under a rock outcropping and sat down to rest. It was then that he noticed ahead reddish flashes on the mountain. He got up and watched the sight in amazement, for what he saw was like a fire that kept bursting out without appearing to consume anything.

Awed and excited by the sight, Gilgamesh set his steps toward it. As he came nearer, the flame flashed up and its glow—a terrible reddish brilliance—struck Gilgamesh. He shielded his eyes but did so too late to avoid being temporarily blinded. Again and again the brilliant glow struck him and each time he was blinded, but each time his eyesight returned.

“What manner of stranger are you?” a voice shouted at him. “Advance that we may look you over!”

The voice came from the same direction as the flame. Gilgamesh advanced toward it, climbing up the rocks. As he ascended, a promontory came into view. Two beings stood upon it, wearing peculiar helmets with sticklike protrusions from their centers, and girdles that were too long and hung like tails. They were manning a circular device mounted on a pole.

“Who are you?” one of the beings shouted to Gilgamesh, “that our rays don’t make your flesh melt away? Are you a god, not a man?”

“I am Gilgamesh, king of Erech,” he said, advancing toward them. “I am the son of the goddess Ninsun. I am two-thirds divine.”

“You must be, or you’d be dead by now,” one of the beings agreed. “What matter brings you here? This is forbidden land, the gods’ Fourth Region!”

“That indeed is my destination,” Gilgamesh said. “If you are the land’s guardians, a sign from the great Lord Anu I have with me to show you.”

He took out the tablet that his mother had given him and showed it to the guardians, who examined it in turns.

“It looks like a Tablet of Destinies, but it’s not,” one of them said. “It is marked with the writing of the people, and the material is of Earth, not of Nibiru.” He threw the tablet in the air, directing a beam at it from the circular device. The tablet fell down intact, but was now scorched and deformed on one side.

“Indeed so,” Gilgamesh said as he retrieved the tablet. “This is a replica—made by my mother the goddess—of a real Tablet of Destinies that was directed to me in a handiwork of Anu, from the Heavens descended. The original, too sacred to be carried about, in her safekeeping has remained.”

“Even so,” one of the guardians said, “no one can enter the forbidden zone without permission.”

“I have the blessing of the Lord Utu,” Gilgamesh said. “Of his offspring I am, with a divine sixth finger I am endowed.” He showed them his hands.

“Not even a god can enter without permission,” a guardian said. “The Place of the Rocketships can be reached only by authorized skyships.”

“Ziusudra, my ancestor, is there,” Gilgamesh said. “I must speak with him. It is a matter of life and death! I beg you, let me through!”

“Ziusudra,” one of the guardians said, “lives in this region, but not at the Place of the Rocketships. He lives in a secluded valley, alone with his wife.”

“If not at the Place of the Rocketships, give me admittance to the valley of Ziusudra, then!”

“No one can travel these mountain passes!” one of the guardians said emphatically.

“But there is another way, a tunnel . . .” the other one added.

“Only one who seeks certain death will travel it!” the first one explained. “It extends for twelve leagues inside the mountain. Dense is its darkness, suffocating its air. It is a tunnel from bygone days, when the rebellious Lord Zu sought refuge in these parts.”

“If I don’t find Ziusudra I’ll perish anyway,” Gilgamesh told them. “Lead me to the tunnel!”

The guardian looked at his comrade, who nodded. “Follow me,” he said to Gilgamesh.

He led him to a path along the rim of the mountain until they reached a large solid boulder that blocked their way. There he took out a baton from his girdle and directed it at the boulder. Without any sound an opening unfolded, as though an unseen hand was opening the door’s bolts.

Gilgamesh stood bewildered and awed. “I’ve never seen such magic,” he told them.

The guardian raised his hand. “The way begins with stairs,” he said, “very slippery they are. Tread carefully!”

And before Gilgamesh could thank him, he turned and left.

Holding on to the walls of the narrow opening, Gilgamesh began to go down the stairs. He entered a cavernous area; by the light coming from the entrance he could see a tunnel ahead. He went toward the tunnel, but by the time he had reached it the outer opening closed up as silently as it had opened, and Gilgamesh found himself in total darkness. He felt the walls until he found the tunnel. Its width was such that he could feel both walls with his outstretched hands; the walls felt smooth to the touch. The floor was also smooth, but his feet felt grooves across it that made the walking less slippery. The ceiling was too high for him to reach, and he had no way of knowing the tunnel’s height.

Like a blind man he walked cautiously, touching the walls with his hands and probing the floor with his feet. After what Gilgamesh had estimated to be one double-hour, he reached an intersection where the tunnel split in two. As he stopped to make up his mind as to which way to go, he saw—or imagined he saw—a flickering light, like that of a dying oil lamp, in one direction. He went into that branch of the tunnel, finding himself again in total darkness. He could feel, however, that the tunnel seemed to curve and slope down. He walked for at least, he thought, another double hour, getting nowhere, and he began to wonder whether he was not following a circle that would bring him back to the tunnel’s entrance . . .

On and on he walked, slipping now and then, or stumbling on a rock that must have fallen from the ceiling. By the fifth double-hour

he sat down exhausted, pondering his situation. He dozed off, and in his half-conscious state he could see secret doors opening in the tunnel's walls, revealing oddly dressed gods performing magical functions. When he came to and opened his eyes, he could see none of these sights and he knew not whether he was seeing things or just dreaming of them.

Rested, he got up and resumed his cautious advance. After another double-hour he began to smell a foul smell, and after a while he saw a brightness ahead. The odor was overpowering as he neared the brightness, but he proceeded nevertheless and reached a huge cavern whose rock walls arched smoothly to form a ceiling over a subterranean lake. The smell and the brightness were given off by the waters, which had a yellowish color. Mystified, Gilgamesh touched the water with his hand; he felt a burning sensation and quickly withdrew it.

On the other side of the lake he could see, by the eerie light, the continuation of the tunnel, and he wondered how he might get across. He searched for a way to go around the lake, but in most places the cavernous walls were so sheer at the waters' surface that there was no way to go without stepping into the water. He found a small rock and threw it in to gauge the depth, but could not hear the rock hitting bottom, and he concluded that the lake was very deep.

He was about to give up when, as he searched the lake's circumference, he saw a niche in the rocky wall. He looked in, and there was a small wooden boat lying there, a single small oar inside it. He dragged the boat and placed it in the water, then heaved it off as he jumped in. With the oar he moved the boat to the other side of the lake, amazed that neither the launching of the boat nor his rowing made any sound. It was as though the cavern, or the eerie waters, swallowed all sounds. . . . It was a haunted place, and perhaps a cursed one too, and Gilgamesh was greatly relieved when he could step off the boat on the other side. He hauled the boat out of the waters and pulled it into where the new tunnel began. He hurried into that tunnel, away from the stench that was causing him, by now, to cough heavily.

The tunnel on this side of the lake was also built in a curve, and after a while the eerie light and the stench of the lake were gone. But unlike the earlier part of the tunnel, this one was inclined upward. Though the incline was very gradual, Gilgamesh, by now tired, hungry, and exhausted, found the going very exerting. He paused often to sit down, even to lie down. It was then that he noticed that the floor, unlike the walls, was surprisingly warm, and this warmth somehow restored his energy and confidence. He continued on his way, reaching a place where the tunnel ended. He felt the walls all around, and there was no doubt: there was no way to go any further.

Like a frenzied man, Gilgamesh touched the walls and the floor. He tried to reach the ceiling. “Oh Utu!” he cried out, “have I come all this way in vain? Is this my fate? To perish in the bowels of the Earth?”

His scream had a magical effect, he knew not how. Suddenly he could feel a cool breeze coming from the direction ahead of him where there had been a solid rock wall just a moment before!

The fresh air revived him and the miracle of the opened wall encouraged him. Walking forward with renewed vigor, he reached a place where he could hear water dropping. He felt the walls until he found the place where droplets were trickling down from the ceiling. He licked the wet wall; it was water, sweeter than any he had ever tasted. He cupped his hands and began to catch the falling droplets, and drank and drank until he had had his fill. Then he lay down to rest and soon fell asleep.

When he finally awoke he drank some more of the water and continued on his way. The tunnel now began to slope down as it curved, and he slid and slipped a few times. But the fresh air that was coming toward him indicated that he was going the right way, and this gave him the strength and the will to continue. Finally, the light breeze turned to a rush of fresh cool air and there was a brightness ahead. When he reached the spot he could see that there was a shaft in the tunnel’s ceiling.

Looking up, he could see the sky!

The shaft had rough edges, as though purposely providing footholds. Slowly Gilgamesh climbed up, and when he reached the top he heaved himself out. He was on a mountainside. Below he

could see a small valley, completely encircled by mountains with rounded peaks. The sky was bright and the sun was shining. He had journeyed a day and a night, twelve double-hours!

Down in the valley Gilgamesh saw a stone house surrounded by a garden, and he quickly set his steps toward it. As he neared the place, he could also see various domestic animals, but their skins had odd colors. When he reached the garden, he stopped, amazed. It had the most beautiful trees and bushes and vines, but it was not real: the foliage was carved out of lapis lazuli, the luscious fruits out of carnelian. As he rushed from tree to tree and from bush to vine, he realized that all were made of precious stones. He looked at the animals, and they too were immobile and carved of stones. He touched them in disbelief.

“The gods have made this garden and village scene for me,” Gilgamesh suddenly heard a voice say behind him.

Gilgamesh turned to see the speaker. He saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, attired in a long white robe that was held in place by a blue girdle. His hair was all white and so was his long beard. The skin of his face and his arms was taut and brown. His forehead was high, his eyes big though sunken. Gilgamesh eyed him as he eyed Gilgamesh.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” the man asked him.

‘‘I seek Ziusudra, he of the Deluge,” Gilgamesh said.

“I am Ziusudra,” the man said, “but it is myriad years since I was called by my name. The gods call me Napishtim, meaning ‘He Who Lives,’ for I live and live and live . . .”

“And I am Gilgamesh, king of Erech.”

“Erech? I know of no such place.”

“It’s a great city, with walls and quays and marketplaces, and a palace and a Sacred Precinct with sky-high temples. In the land of the Edin it is situated, near the Euphrates River.”

“Of that land I myself was a king, but of a city by name of Erech I have never known,” Ziusudra said. He looked at Gilgamesh with doubting eyes. “Are you a mere apparition, a passing vision?”

“Old man,” Gilgamesh said annoyed, “a city by the name of Erech does exist and I am its king! But it came into being after the Deluge and not in your days. In honor of Anu, the Lord of Lords, its Sacred Precinct was established, and now the Lady Ishtar is its mistress.”

“So, a servant of that mischievous goddess you are?” Ziusudra asked in a friendlier tone.

“And an offspring of her brother! The Lord Utu is my godfather!” Gilgamesh announced proudly.

“So am I,” Ziusudra said. “My father Ubartutu, who was king of Shuruppak before me, was by the Lord Utu fathered.”

“So have I heard it from my mother, the Lady Ninsun. That is why I’ve sought you, for like you, I am partly divine.” He held out his hands to Ziusudra, showing him the telltale scars.

Ziusudra looked at the outstretched hands of Gilgamesh. Then, finding his own similar scars despite his browned and taut skin, he touched them to those of Gilgamesh. He turned toward the house and called out, “Amzara! An offspring of the Lord Utu, a king from the faraway land, has come to visit us!”

A woman came forward to greet them. She was wearing a long white robe. She was as tall as Ziusudra, but much slimmer. Her skin was also taut and brown, her hair also pure white. Her eyes were large and deep as were Ziusudra’s, but her face, though sunken, retained a youthful beauty.

“This is the wife of mine, Amzara is her name,” Ziusudra said to Gilgamesh. “He is a king of a new city by the name of Erech, and his name is Gilgamesh,” Ziusudra told his wife. “How or why he has come hither, I know not at all.”

“I’ve sought you, Ziusudra, for I am seeking Everlife,” Gilgamesh told him.

“Of what you call Everlife I have had my fill,” Ziusudra said in disdain. “Now come into the house and refresh yourself, then tell us your tale.”

Once inside, they seated Gilgamesh on a mat and gave him a cushion for support. The wife served him thin wheat wafers and fresh

water, and he ate and drank. “Now tell us,” Ziusudra said, “the tale of your journey and your purpose.”

“I left my home by ship,” Gilgamesh began, “but she was wrecked by an unseen hand. I continued on foot, traversing the wilderness, climbing mountains, crossing valleys. I ate berries and lizards, I drank dewdrops and hidden water. I slew a bear and two lions—a skin of them I wrapped about me as a coat. Thus I came to the place of the ale-woman. She led me to Urshanabi, the boatman. He took me across the Sea of Death and told me what path to take. The guardians of the region struck me with their beams, but I was not affected. Realizing I was two-thirds divine, they opened for me the gateway to the bowels of the Earth. . . . I walked in the circling tunnel for twelve double-hours, in total darkness. Then I uttered a shout and the exit opened up, bringing me to your valley.”

“A likely story!” Amzara said.

“By my life, it is the truth!” Gilgamesh exclaimed.

“And why have you come all this way, enduring all those hardships?” Ziusudra asked.

“On account of the omen from the Lord Anu, the father of the gods,” Gilgamesh said. He took the Tablet of Destinies out of his robe. “This is a Tablet of Destinies. It was sent to me from the Heavens, the handiwork of the Lord Anu.”

They took the tablet and examined it. “I have never seen the likes of it before,” Ziusudra said.

“The handiwork of Anu, scorched and damaged?” Amzara said, doubt in her voice.

Gilgamesh grimaced in annoyance. “The tablet that has come from the Heavens by my mother Ninsun is hidden—it is too sacred to be touched. This is a likeness thereof, and its writing has been made visible in our language. A craftsman of my mother’s mother, the great Lady Ninharsag, the great Healer, fashioned it. It is scorched because one of the guardians tested it with his beam.”

His hand jerked as he retrieved the tablet, and he caught their stare.

“When I took the heavenly tablet out of Anu’s handiwork that came down from the skies, by a malady I was afflicted. It’s within my bones, consuming my innards. . . . It’s on account of it that I must attain Everlife before death overtakes me.”

Ziusudra and his wife exchanged glances.

“If that is what you seek . . .” Ziusudra began.

“Tell us more of your people, your city, the land,” Amzara interjected. “The last time we saw the land, it was swept over by an avalanche of water.”

Though tiredness was overwhelming him, Gilgamesh told them of Erech and the other cities of the Land Between the Rivers, of the people and the temples and the gods that dwelled therein. The more he told them, the more they wanted to know. “It has been such a long time,” they kept saying. “There has been no one to tell us all this,” they kept repeating.

“No one?” Gilgamesh wondered.

“No mortal can ever come this way,” Ziusudra said. “The Eagles bring us provisions every new moon, but they speak little to us, if at all.”

“How terrible!” Gilgamesh replied. “Can you leave and go where others dwell?”

“No, to this place we are confined, for between the contending Enlil and Enki we were in the midst . . .”

“I must hear of that!” Gilgamesh exclaimed.

Ziusudra looked at his wife; she nodded. He took a sip of water, then leaned on a cushion as he made himself comfortable.

“A hidden matter I will reveal to you, Gilgamesh, a secret of the gods,” he began. “When I was king in Shuruppak, Anu, the father of the gods, ruled in Heaven. On Earth, Enlil and Enki, though brothers, were jealous of each other. Shuruppak was dedicated to their sister Sud, the one you called Ninharsag. But the people were divided: some swore by Enlil, others by Enki. Of him, of the Lord Enki, who mankind with Sud had created, I myself was a worshipper . . .”

He stopped, enwrapped in memories. Gilgamesh was silent, his eyes closed.

“Behold the hero who seeks Everlife,” Amzara said. “Sleep has fanned him like a mist! Wake him up, that he may return through the gate by which he came!”

“No, let him sleep,” Ziusudra said. He took his wife’s hand in his. “The gods sent him to us, with news of the past. It must be an omen of our future!”

She looked into his eyes and nodded. They laid Gilgamesh out on the mat and put the cushion under his head.

“He is in build and appearance not unlike you,” Amzara told her husband.

“Myriad years, and we look alike, speak alike, offspring of the same seed!” Ziusudra said. “Mankind flourishes again, olden cities have been rebuilt and new ones established. Our three sons have done well. . . . Is it not time, my dear spouse?”

Amzara said not a word, just nodded her head.

* * *

Gilgamesh awoke with a startle. He looked about him and recalled where he was. “I fell asleep, I was so tired. Why did you awaken me no sooner than I had closed my eyes?”

“By yourself you have awakened, and you have slept seven days and seven nights!” Ziusudra answered him. “Each day my wife baked a fresh wheat cake for you—count them! Seven they are in number!”

“Forgive me then for my hasty words,” Gilgamesh said, embarrassed. “It is as though but a moment has passed since you began your tale. . . . A secret of the gods you were about to tell me?”

“Eat your cake and drink some water, and for my tale you will have patience,” Ziusudra replied. He glanced at his wife who was seated nearby then, after Gilgamesh had eaten his meal, he began to speak slowly.

“At that time, the land extended and mankind multiplied. The Anunnaki, those who to Earth from the Heavens came, were mostly male, and after a while took a liking to the daughters of Man. Even the great ones like Utu had children by Earthling women. Enki, the

creator of mankind, was pleased that the gods and his creatures could intermingle and have offspring. Sud was pleased, and in her city, Shuruppak, a demigod was anointed as a king. But the great Enlil was angry. The distractions were keeping the Anunnaki away from their mission, he complained. They of Nibiru should not become involved in the affairs of the Earthlings, he insisted. It was all not to his liking!"

Ziusudra paused to take a sip of water. "Then when the time of Nibiru's crossing was approaching, Enlil called a council of the gods. 'The passage of Nibiru in Earth's vicinity,' he reported, 'could cause a tidal wave that would sweep over the Earth. The Lord Anu ordered that all the Anunnaki leave the face of the Earth in their spacecraft.' 'And what about mankind?' Enki asked. 'Let mankind perish!' Enlil said, and he made all of them swear to keep the nearing calamity a secret from mankind."

"The end of all flesh on Earth!" Gilgamesh exclaimed.

"That was Enlil's wish. But the Lord Enki, though bound by an oath, called me to his temple. Addressing a screen, he made sure I could hear his words. 'A killing flood is coming,' he said, 'wiping all off the face of the Earth. The Anunnaki will escape in their skyships. Enlil made us swear to secrecy, so that mankind should perish. But Sud and I have chosen you to preserve the seed of mankind, the seed of all that lives on Earth. . . . Build a boat,' he said. He gave me its dimensions, its plan so that it could survive below the waves, its caulking so that it would float though sunken. Then he implored me to hurry, and when the construction was finished, to watch for a signal. 'When Utu shall order a trembling at dusk, and you will see a rain of eruptions,' he said, 'you are to board the ship with all of your offspring, all of your family and kin, and the craftsmen who helped with the building, and a navigator that the Lord Enki will send you, and all the beasts of the field, and all manner of other creatures, that you may all survive the coming Deluge.'"

It was getting hot inside the house, and Ziusudra wiped away his perspiration. Amzara sat silently, nodding her head from time to time. Gilgamesh sat enthralled. "On the stated day, a memorable day, with the first glow of dawn, a black cloud arose in the southern skies. A

storm began to thunder, moving over hills and plains. At their stations the Anunnaki took to their skyships, setting the land ablaze with their glare, shaking the land as a pot. We hurried into the boat and battened the hatches. Cowering like dogs we crouched against the boat's walls. For six days and six nights the storm swept over the land. Then the sea grew quiet; the tempest was still. The boat rose to float upon the water. I opened a hatch and looked out. Where land had been, there was now water. All was covered with water, as level as a flat roof, and all that had been was swept away. All life perished and mankind was turned into clay!"

The memories brought tears to Ziusudra's eyes and his voice quivered as he continued. "Wherever I looked, I saw only water. I sent out birds to seek land, but there was none. We sat and mourned for many days. . . . But then the waters began to recede, and one day the dove I had sent out did not return, and we knew that there was land somewhere. Whereupon Puzuramurri, the navigator appointed by Enki, directed the boat to the twin-peaked Mount Nisir, as the Lord Enki had instructed. There, at night, the boat shuddered and stopped. We had struck dry land!"

"The Deluge was over!" Gilgamesh exclaimed.

"The tidal wave, yes, but not the calamity. I let all that were in the ship out and offered a burnt sacrifice. As the full majesty of the two peaks came into view, we could see the skyships landing, one after another. They smelled the savory burnt meat and came over, like flies attracted by a honey pot. One by one they landed, until the Lords Enki and Enlil came too. Enlil saw us and was furious. 'Who broke the oath and to an Earthling the secret revealed?' he shouted. . . . The wise Sud soothed his anger and brought up the matter of my divine seed. The others spoke too, asking for leniency. At last Enki spoke up, admitting that he might have revealed to me the secret of the gods. 'Valiant Enlil, my brother,' he said, 'to till the land and tend the orchards and shepherd the sheep and mine the gold, the Earthlings are needed. Without mankind, the gods cannot remain. If on Earth the Anunnaki are to stay, with mankind they must share it!'"

"And Enlil was swayed?" Gilgamesh asked.

Ziusudra raised a hand, indicating that he was not to be interrupted. “He took counsel of the wise words, but was not forgiving. ‘Let the offspring of Ziusudra multiply and spread, but with sickness and death be afflicted. Let mankind share the Earth with the Anunnaki, but be split up and divided into regions. Let some worship my house and some that of my half-brother, Enki, but the two shall not mingle. . . . And as for Ziusudra and his wife, who were merely following Enki’s disclosures, let them come and live among the gods!’ He took us each by the hand, and led us to his skyship. ‘You will reside in a region of the gods,’ he said, ‘until the next nearing of Nibiru, when the rocketships shall rise to meet the ships that sail between the planets.’”

His voice trailed off and he fell silent. Amzara was also silent.

“That calamity, the awesome Deluge, how long ago was it?” Gilgamesh asked.

“Nibiru has already come and gone twice since then,” Ziusudra answered.

“But Enlil said . . .” Gilgamesh began and did not complete his sentence.

“There were wars, wars among the gods,” Ziusudra said. “Awesome battles, right here in the skies of the forbidden zone, at the time of the first crossing. . . . Then, on the second one, there was no room for us. You see, Gilgamesh, this is the real secret of the gods: even they grow old and die, except that their years are of a different count than ours. . . . Yes, Gilgamesh of the faraway—for everything and everyone there is an appointed time, on Earth as in the Heavens. A time to be born is a companion to a time to die!”

“But you have lived all that time; as gods you have become!” Gilgamesh insisted. “It is this secret that I’ve come to unravel, Ziusudra!”

“It is the water of our well that keeps us forever rejuvenated,” Ziusudra told him.

“It is a plant, the fruit of the Tree of Life, my mother said!” Gilgamesh protested.

“It is the water,” Ziusudra said emphatically. “There is indeed a plant, and its fruit is the Fruit of Life. But were we to consume it, it

would not grow again. Therefore the gods planted it at the bottom of the well, there never wilting. We drink the water and bathe in it, for it is by the fruit's force the Water of Life."

"Where is the well?"

"In the handiworked garden. The Anunnaki dug it. Its water is the purest, from two rivers that flow beneath the Earth. And the plant itself, from Nibiru was it brought."

"It is indeed a marvel," Gilgamesh said. "To live and live without end is indeed a divine blessing!"

"To live and live, secluded, to know that your sons and grandsons and all who follow have been dying. . . . You call that a blessing?"

"These are words of despair," Gilgamesh replied. "Your seclusion has befuddled your reason. . . . As for me, life over death I'll choose any time. Lead me to the well, that I may partake of its water and live forever!"

Ziusudra looked at his wife. She nodded.

"To live forever you must stay here forever," he said to Gilgamesh. "You must constantly drink the water, or its effects will wear off."

"Show me the well!" Gilgamesh persisted.

"Come with me," Ziusudra said. He led Gilgamesh to the artificial garden and showed him the well. "It is deep, very deep," he said. Then he turned back to the house and left Gilgamesh alone in the garden.

Gilgamesh looked into the well but could not see its bottom. He tore off the hem of his garment and made strips of it, and with the strips he tied heavy stones to his feet. He looked back toward the house. Ziusudra and Amzara were standing in the doorway, watching him from a distance. He saw Amzara raise her hand, as though bidding him farewell.

But I'm only going to dive and pluck out the fruit, he thought. He raised his hand to them and waved it in a friendly manner. Then he jumped into the well.

The cool water struck him like a blow. He held his breath as the heavy stones pulled him down. Though the well was deep, the water was so pure that light from its mouth penetrated downward. When he

reached the bottom, he saw a plant gently swaying in the water, for there were currents at the bottom of the well. The plant had a long straight stem with short, thick branches from which grew round fruits. He grabbed the stem, and with a mighty pull he plucked out the plant —roots and all. Holding the plant in his left hand, he used his right hand to cut loose the heavy stones with his dagger, thereby freeing his feet.

He expected to float up with the cherished prize in his hand. But the moment he had plucked the plant the water began to whirl, keeping him pinned to the bottom of the well. His lungs were bursting for air and his eyes blurred. He was losing consciousness and felt that he was being pulled by unseen hands, sucked in by a powerful mouth. But he held on to the precious plant as one would hold on to his only life.

15

As the prescribed rituals and procedures that had been established in the earliest times required, the twelve-day New Year festival began with the quiet departure of Ishtar, Ninsun, and the ten other lesser deities from Erech—a symbolic act commemorating the time when the Anunnaki were not yet on Earth. This took place after sundown on the first night, when the whole populace and their household beasts were required to be indoors, for to be outside meant certain death.

The gods moved silently from the Sacred Precinct where they had assembled, accompanied by torch-bearing priests. They arrived at the Holy Quay, there to board barges manned by priests. Sailing along the Canal of Deep Waters on their way to the Euphrates River, they passed through the Great Gate in the city's wall.

It was past midnight when they reached the designated shore. Alighting, they marched silently to the *Bit Akiti* compound, the conglomerate of reed huts called "Life On Earth Begins." Fixing the torches in position around the compound, the priests retreated to the barges and returned to Erech, leaving the gods alone. What rituals they conducted there, what secret deliberations they held, no mortal man—not even the High Priest—had ever known.

In the morning, pretending to discover that the gods had left the city, the priests in the Sacred Precinct blew rams' horns to alert the populace. The gods, the source of all abundance, secure living, and essential ordinances, had abandoned their human flocks. Runners from the temples shouted as they scurried in the streets, "Penitence! Penitence! Let one and all confess their sins and ask for forgiveness!" Thus began the four days of penitence and confessionals, when the people asked forgiveness of each other and of the gods and confessed their sins—some at the main temples, some at street corner shrines, but most within the confines of their homes, at domestic altars.

On the second morning the High Priest arose two hours before dawn, and purified and properly attired, went into the temple of Ishtar to present to her the customary morning offerings—as though by pretending that the goddess was there he had expected her to be back. But she was not, and the wailing that followed filled the town.

On the third morning the High Priest placed two statuettes before the throne of Ishtar: one of cedar wood and the other of cypress. Both were overlaid with gold: one in the image of a serpent and the other that of a scorpion. And in the presence of an assembly of priests, the High Priest proclaimed the willingness of the people to be afflicted by these creeping creatures. Their poison would kill the sinners and chastise those who were righteous, thereby making it possible for the gods to return and have mercy and restore life and abundance.

Symbolically recalling the times before there were cities and villages and orchards and fields, when man lived in the wilderness—bitten and stung by the creeping animals and preyed upon by the wild animals—the priests then released from their cages the lions that were harnessed to drive Ishtar's chariot. The beasts ran wild and bewildered in the city's streets, clawing at anyone who stood in their way, mauling the few men who, in order to prove their courage, dared run ahead of them in the streets.

On the morning of the fourth day the High Priest ascended the great ziggurat precisely three hours and twenty minutes before sunrise, and located the Morning Star, the planet of Ishtar. Pronouncing the blessings, he lifted his hands and hailed the planet. Then, from the height of the ziggurat, he shouted to the assembled priests their instructions.

"In Heaven, Ishtar is arisen! The heavenly queen has heard our prayers. In the Sacred Precinct, all has been done that could be done. Now it is for king and people to make Ishtar rise on Earth! Go, pass the word, let it be known in the palace and in the city!"

* * *

It was on that day, the afternoon of the fourth day of the festival, that Niglugal was nervously pacing his chamber. He stopped only when

Kaba came in; they locked arms in greeting.

“There’s growing unrest in the city,” Kaba said right away.

“I can feel it even here,” Niglugal agreed.

“Tomorrow is the fifth day,” Kaba said, “when the people march on the palace. . . . And we have no king. Urnungal must be seated on the throne at once!”

“It is most uncommon,” Niglugal said, “to enthrone a king without the prior blessing of the goddess.”

“But the Lady Ishtar—all the gods are in the *Bit Akiti*!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Niglugal said, almost shouting. “It’s that cursed agreement reached between Ishtar and Ninsun, to await until now for the king to return or to be found dead. . . . Were it not for that, don’t you think I would have already acted?”

“Acted? How?” Kaba asked, staring at Niglugal.

“Never mind,” Niglugal replied, avoiding the commander’s stare. “The fact is, a king is required for tomorrow’s rituals, and there is none. On the other hand, the foremost son, even if we ignore his young age, cannot be enthroned without the goddess . . .”

“Therefore?”

“Therefore, there will have to be a substitute, a temporary king,” Niglugal said as he turned to face Kaba.

“You?” Kaba asked, his hand grasping the dagger in his belt.

“Yes, I, unless you can come up with another solution. . . . Can you?”

“I will ponder it and discuss it with the other commanders,” Kaba told him. “I’ve sworn loyalty to Gilgamesh!”

“So have I,” Niglugal said. “But he’s gone, and apparently no longer among the living.”

They locked arms again as Kaba left, and there was a broad smile on Niglugal’s face when he was alone.

Fate, he thought, had been good to him.

* * *

“Open the gate and let me in!” the man shouted to the guards on the ramparts.

They looked down and saw a haggard man, his clothes ragged, his hair grown wild, his cheeks sunken, his sandals torn.

“Go away, beggar!” one of the soldiers shouted. “The city’s gates are closed during the New Year festival. Even beggars know that!”

“The New Year festival? Has a year gone by?”

“Don’t you know the seasons, beggar?” the soldier shouted down, raising his spear. “Be gone, or I’ll bring you to your senses!”

“I am no beggar!” the wanderer said. “I am the king!”

The soldier burst out in laughter. “Come quick and raise your weapons in attention,” he called out to his comrades. “The king of the beggars is at the gate!”

“I am Gilgamesh, the king of Erech!” the man at the gate shouted. “Open the gate and let me in!”

The soldiers on the rampart, summoned by their comrade to see the boastful beggar, stopped their laughter, for there was authority and command in the man’s voice. “We’d better call the captain,” one of them finally said.

“Hey, old man,” the captain shouted when he came on the scene. “The king Gilgamesh is long gone and dead. . . . Go away, find shelter in the fields until the gates are opened, then I’ll let you in and give you alms. Now, be gone!”

“I am no beggar in need of alms!” the man shouted back. “I am Gilgamesh, gone but returned, and among the living! I am the son of divine Ninsun, the father of Urnungal. By the great gods, open the gate that I may enter my city!”

The captain exchanged glances with the soldiers. “Even if there be truth in your words, the gate cannot be opened until the festival is over,” he said.

“Call Niglugal, the chancellor!” the man at the gate ordered.

The captain looked about him, undecided. One or two of the soldiers shrugged their shoulders. “Very well,” the captain finally said, “we’ll notify the palace. Let the higher-ups deal with the clamor of this stranger.”

It was some time until Niglugal appeared on the ramparts. The moment he came into view, the man at the gate cried out, “Niglugal, my faithful chamberlain! I am Gilgamesh, your king! I’ve come back!”

“The voice,” Niglugal cried out, “it is the king’s voice! Open the gate, hurry!”

“But the festival . . .” the captain began to protest.

“It’s the king, you fool!” Niglugal shouted at him. “Do you wish the son to inherit with a father still alive?”

As the captain shouted orders to open the gate, Niglugal ran down the rampart’s steps. He waited for the gate to open and for the wanderer to come in through it.

“Niglugal, my faithful chamberlain!” the man cried out, extending his arms. “Come, let me embrace you!”

Niglugal bowed his head, then eyed the man. He stepped forward and, grabbing the extended hands, turned them sideways, looking for telltale scars. They were there.

“Forgive my doubts,” Niglugal said, “but I had to make sure. Except for your voice and your height, you have changed so much, my king!”

Gilgamesh pulled him closer and embraced him. They stood thus embraced for a few moments, tears in their eyes.

“We took you for dead,” Niglugal said. “Seafarers found debris of your ship. . . . And here you are, alive! But your cheeks are sunken, your flesh is shrunken, your skin is like leather. Where have you been, how did you survive?”

“I’ll tell you all,” Gilgamesh said, “after I regain my strength and composure. Take me to the palace!”

Accompanied by a platoon of soldiers, they walked slowly to the palace. As they made their progress, word of the king’s return spread through the city. “Gilgamesh is alive! Gilgamesh is back!” people began to shout to each other. Throngs began to fill the streets leading to the palace. Gilgamesh waved his hand to them; some returned his salute.

“What day of the festival is it, that the people are in the streets?” Gilgamesh asked.

“The fifth.”

Gilgamesh stopped his stride to face Niglugal. “The fifth day? Then I’m back in the nick of time!”

“Indeed,” Niglugal said. “We’d better hurry, for soon pandemonium will break out.”

Gilgamesh put his hand on Niglugal’s shoulder to halt him. “If I were not back today,” he said, “what then?”

“By agreement between the goddesses, your mother, and the Lady Ishtar, the year had to be awaited. No one was seated on the throne.”

“My son, Urnungal?”

“He is well, but has not been enthroned.”

“The Lady Ishtar favors another? Enkullab the High Priest?”

“Enkullab is dead,” Niglugal said. “Struck down by the unseen hand of Anu.”

“Anu be great!” Gilgamesh exclaimed. “When did that happen?”

“Soon after you had sailed past Eridu, onto the Lower Sea.”

“You must tell me how it occurred,” Gilgamesh said. “Who is High Priest now?”

“By the wish of Ishtar, the priest who had served the longest was chosen. Dinenlil is his name. Of Nippur’s priestly seed he is. His father heads the academy of the ways of the stars in Nippur, and is a faithful servant of the Lord Enlil.”

“My son is safe, then? The enmity of the temple has ceased?”

“Yes, indeed so,” Niglugal replied. “Now you’d better hurry. Wash and change, for the demanding crowds will soon be at the palace.”

They quickened their steps. The closer they came to the palace, the denser the crowds became, and the soldiers had to form a phalange to clear a path for the king and his chamberlain. As they neared the palace and could be seen from its watchtowers, a platoon of soldiers rushed out to their assistance. It was headed by Kaba, the troops’ commander.

“Hail to the king!” he shouted as the two groups met.

Gilgamesh locked arms with him, in the manner of heroes. “It is good to see you, Kaba,” he said.

“Welcome back, my lord,” Kaba replied, bowing his head. “We’ve all missed you.”

“And where is Urnungal?” Gilgamesh asked.

“Awaiting you, in the royal chambers,” Kaba said. “He’s well.”

Gilgamesh exchanged glances with the commander. “I can’t wait to see him,” he replied.

* * *

There was a long embrace as father and son met, and there were tears in the eyes of Gilgamesh and a lump in his throat.

“How you’ve grown!” Gilgamesh finally said.

“They said you were dead,” Urnungal told him, “but I couldn’t believe it. . . .” He buried his face in his father’s chest.

Gilgamesh stroked his son’s bushy hair. “You are the only thing worth living for,” he said softly. Then he pushed his son back, taking a good look at him.

“Big and strong, and more mature!” Gilgamesh told him, smiling. “A worthy heir!”

“Now that you’re back, I really have time to mature and learn the affairs of state,” Urnungal said, staring back at his father. “Though you’re much leaner and browner of skin, you are your old same self, but now even better, aren’t you?”

Gilgamesh looked puzzled.

“My grandmother, the Lady Ninsun, told me your secret, Father,” Urnungal said, smiling. “That you’d gone to obtain the Fruit of Life, as your divine ancestry entitles you to!”

“She did?” Gilgamesh said, putting his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Alas, that is not what fate has destined for me. . . . Come, sit down and I’ll tell you.” Fruit and wine were in the chamber, and Gilgamesh sipped of the wine to garner strength.

“After our ship was sunk by a demon,” he began to tell his son, “only Enkidu and I were saved. But Enkidu, a creature of Enki, could not withstand the saltwater of the sea. In front of my own eyes he

withered. . . . I crossed the wilderness by myself, on foot, recalling the map that my mother had shown me. My sufferings and adventures I will save for later, for I wish it all to be taken down by a scribe. After much adventure I crossed the sea—whose water is death—with the help of Urshanabi, a boatman of the gods. I passed through the sacred portals; I withstood the challenge of the forbidden zone's guardians. They showed me the way through a tunnel to the valley where Ziusudra, the hero of the Deluge, has been living with his wife. They have survived all these myriad years on account of a well at whose bottom the Fruit of Life grows. Drinking the water, they were constantly rejuvenated. . . . I jumped into the well and plucked the Plant of Life, so that I might bring it to Erech, replant it, and be rejuvenated!"

"This is wonderful news!" Urnungal exclaimed. "There was talk of my being elevated to the throne, but I told them I don't wish to be king . . . not while you are alive!"

The hand of Gilgamesh jerked. "That is my secret," he said. "There's death in my bones, my days are numbered . . . and you will be king!"

"But the Fruit of Life—you got it, you said!"

"After I had plucked the plant and cut loose the stones off my feet, my eyes blurred and my lungs exploded. The currents of the two rivers, joined at the bottom of the well, grabbed me in a whirlpool. I lost consciousness and was carried like a dead corpse by the swift currents. . . . When I awoke I found myself by the shore of an unknown sea, still holding on to the plant. I walked along the shore, seeing neither the valley nor the mountains that surround it. At long last I saw a fisherman; he gave me water and bread. He knew not of Erech, nor of our land. But he told me that across the narrow sea I would find a village. He took me across in his boat and showed me a place with trees that gave shade and a fountain of cool water . . ."

Gilgamesh stopped long enough to drink water from the pitcher. "Though my ordeal was by water, somehow I was thirsty and dried out. . . . I took off my garment and laid it and the plant beside the fountain, then dove into its pool for a refreshing swim . . ."

His hand jerked violently and tears came to his eyes.

“What happened then?” Urnungal asked.

“A serpent . . . a serpent robbed me of Everlife!”

“A serpent?”

“A serpent, that vilest of creatures, sniffed the fragrance of the plant that I had left beside the fountain. . . . It came up from among the rocks and carried off the plant! I saw it slithering away as I was coming out of the pool. I grabbed a rock to crush it, but before I could take aim, it vanished behind the rocks and all my frantic searching was in vain . . .”

“And the plant, the Fruit of Life?” Urnungal cried out.

“Vanished with the serpent. . . . I sat and wept bitterly, my son. Tears ran down my face for hours. I raised my voice to Utu; to the Lord Anu I shouted in anger and anguish. And then I laughed and laughed . . .”

“Laughed?”

“Don’t you see the irony, Urnungal? By plucking out the plant from the well, unthinking of the consequences, death to Ziusudra and his wife I had brought. . . . And the lone fisherman, and the serpent to which he had brought me, were instruments in my quick punishment. . . . Man, I realized, cannot escape his fate. The higher we climb, the harder we fall!”

Urnungal put his hand on his father’s arm. “You have seen unseen places,” he said, “climbed the snowbound mountains, vanquished Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven. . . . Your name shall never be forgotten, your tale shall be forever recited!”

“Of my journeys and deeds, my adventures in the faraway and this day’s return to Erech, I will recite to Dubshar, the royal scribe, that he may inscribe it all on clay tablets. Now, my son, if you do not wish to become king as yet, let me ready myself for the coming rites, and perhaps even catch some needed sleep . . .”

He kissed his son on the forehead as Urnungal was leaving.

* * *

After four days of penitence and apprehension, the fifth day of the New Year festival provided outlets for the people’s bottled emotions

to break loose. By noontime the populace had taken to the streets and were engaged in noisemaking—the beating of drums and the blowing of horns. The commotion reached its peak in late afternoon, when the people grouped themselves into a riotous procession that converged on the palace. The priests had done what they could to secure the return of the gods. Only the king was left to intercede on behalf of the people—to atone for them, to accept the humiliations and punishments that the transgressions had called for so that the city and its people could be purified again and be thus worthy of the gods' return.

On this occasion, the king had to step out of the palace alone, without guards or royal entourage. He was taunted by the people—as well as urged on by them—as he led the procession to the Sacred Precinct.

"It's this part that I utterly dislike," Gilgamesh said to the others who stood with him on the ramparts of the main palace gate. "But as king, I'll do my duty . . ."

He waited until the crowds' shouts had narrowed to demands for the king to come forth and lead the penitent procession. Then he came down and exited through the gate. The crowd cleared a path for him to their rear so that he could lead them to the Sacred Precinct. And once he began the march, the shouts and drum beating and horn blowing resumed. With all of the jostling, those at the head of the crowd, the city Elders, kept the throng at a certain distance behind the king.

Opening the Sacred Precinct's gates with pretended reluctance, the priests let the crowd in. Approaching the Table of Sacrifices, the king offered to the disappeared gods not the customary sacrifice of a ewe, but his regal symbols. Aided by the priests, first he gave up his crown and mantle, symbols of his divinely given authority; then the symbol of kingship—the scepter—was taken away; and finally he had to give up the Sacred Mace, the symbol of power and conquest. Thus deprived of all authority, both heavenly and of Earth, he stood on his knees before the High Priest. "I am here to confess my sins and transgressions," the king said, for it was his Day of Atonement. And in full view of all the people, the High Priest slapped the king on

each side of his face and pulled his ears, as a sign of ultimate degradation.

"I am here to confess my sins and transgressions," the king announced again and again, seven times in all.

And then the High Priest said to him in a loud voice: "Be gone into the shrine, there to pray for forgiveness."

Following this, the people, in hushed silence, waited for sundown, the beginning of the sixth day.

As darkness fell and the stars in the Heavens became fully visible, the High Priest appeared out of the Eanna and slowly mounted the ziggurat's steps, uttering hymns and prayers and offering libations at each stage of the ziggurat. Then, as a complete hush fell upon the crowd, it was time to perform the annual reading of *When In the Heights*—the Epic of Creation, the affirmation of the faith. It was the sacred tale of how the solar system had come into being in primeval days, how the Firmament and the Earth were created, how Nibiru had joined the solar system, how life began, and how the Anunnaki had built on Earth the Gateway of the Gods.

Though he had heard the poetic tale recited ever since he was a child, Gilgamesh was overwhelmed each and every time by the scope and majesty of the age-old verses:

> *When in the heights Heaven had not been named,*
> *And below firm ground—Earth—had not been called;*
> *Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,*
> *Mummu, and Tiamat who bore them all,*
> *their waters mingled together.*
>
> *No reed had yet been formed, no marshland had appeared.*
> *None of the celestials had yet been brought into being—*
> *none bore a name, their Destinies were undetermined.*

In the utter silence the High Priest continued to recite the ancient poem.

In vivid language, describing the planets as living creatures born in pairs after the three primordial bodies, the poem described the

appearance of Nibiru from outer space, from the Deep in which he, Nibiru, had been created:

> *Alluring was his figure, sparkling the lift of his eyes;*
> *Lordly was his gait, commanding as of olden times.*
> *Greatly exalted was he above the celestials;*
> *Exceeding them all, he was the loftiest.*

Passing by the outer planets, *" fire blazed forth from his lips,"* and the other planets *"heaped upon him their own awesome flashes."* They pulled pieces of Nibiru off him, forming his sidelings, tugging him toward their midst. Thus they endowed Nibiru with a Destiny, a course in the Heavens that led him to collide with Tiamat.

There were occasional outcries of adoration and awe as the High Priest recited the verses describing the celestial collision and how the sidelings of Nibiru split Tiamat in two, smashing one half to bits and pieces to create the Celestial Bracelet and the Shiny Herd, and fashioning Earth from the other half. Liking what he saw, the celestial god separated the waters and the dry land upon the Earth, and created life in its waters and upon the dry land, and directed the Anunnaki to build upon Earth their Home Away from Home, and fashion Man in their image.

"Thus were Heaven and Earth created," the High Priest concluded reciting the sixth tablet.

There was a great shout of "hurrah!" from the crowd, and all at once the priests stationed on the ramparts and atop the temples lit their torches, and there was light upon the great courtyard and the thronged people. The High Priest then began to recite, from the seventh tablet, Nibiru's sixty names, the crowd repeating each name after it was pronounced by the High Priest. And after the last name was recited, there were shouts of joy and the playing of cymbals, for the void and darkness were gone. Earth and its people had been re-created and the people were reassured of the seasons and the rains and abundance.

At the gate of the Sacred Precinct, a retinue was awaiting the king, to accompany him back to the palace. The High Priest, accompanied

by his retinue, retired to the main temple. And the dispersing crowd burst into song and dance, for well they knew that the gods were now certain to return.

The seventh day that followed was, as symbolism prescribed, the day of the return of the gods. For just as they had done when the settling of Earth—the seventh planet—all began, so would the gods settle back in Erech on this seventh day.

As was the custom for the occasion, the populace prepared standards bearing the celestial emblems of the gods: the radiating planet, symbol of Nibiru and its ruler Anu; the seven-pointed star that was the emblem of Enlil, Lord of Earth; the crescent, symbol of Enlil's son Sin, whose celestial counterpart was the moon; and the eight-pointed star, the symbol of Ishtar, whose celestial counterpart was the planet next to Earth in its position from the outer limits of the twelve-member solar system.

The gods, arriving at the Holy Quay in their barges, were met by a jubilant populace and a large contingent of priests. The latter had litters ready to mount for the Twelve Gods, led by Ishtar. Platoons of soldiers held back the crowds that pressed forward to get a closer look at the deities and kept a path open for the sacred procession. When the gods were safely seated upon the thronelike litters, the priests playing cymbals and handheld harps struck up a processional tune. The litters were raised to the shoulders of the carrying-priests, and led by the High Priest, the procession began its ascent toward the Sacred Precinct. Then, as gods and priests left the quay, the soldiers let go and the crowd surged behind the sacred procession.

Stopping at the prescribed seven stations, the priests made the required pronouncements commemorating the passage of the Anunnaki by the several outer planets and their arrival on Earth. And thus, with music and gaiety and cheering, the procession entered the Sacred Precinct through its main gate.

It was when the gods alighted from their litters that Ishtar stopped and summoned the High Priest.

"Dinenlil," she said, "has a decision been reached at the palace while I was gone? Will the boy be my consort, or did Niglugal gather the courage to declare himself successor?"

“Neither,” Dinenlil said as he bowed to the ground. “Gilgamesh has returned.”

“Gilgamesh is back in Erech?”

“Indeed so, Queen of Heaven,” the High Priest said.

“I will summon you later. Be ready with all the details,” Ishtar told him.

Back at her sacred abode, as the accompanying priests stayed behind and her faithful handmaiden, Ninsubur, met her, Ishtar was visibly agitated.

“Is something the matter, my lady?” Ninsubur asked as Ishtar threw her regalia angrily to the floor.

“Gilgamesh is back!” Ishtar shouted. “Would you believe that?”

“Shouldn’t that please you, my lady?” Ninsubur said. “You’ve said to me, have you not, that of all the men that you’ve had since Dumuzi’s death, Gilgamesh was your most beloved?”

“That’s why I am so annoyed, Ninsubur,” Ishtar said. “For I’ve put a curse on him, and thereby on his mother. To seek life forever and never find it, that was my curse. If he is not to live, why has he returned, to stir up my emotions for naught?”

“Perhaps the curse had no effect. What if he will find Everlife?”

Ishtar smiled. “You are wise, Ninsubur. You always find words to becalm me. . . . Now, help me get ready to see the High Priest and to learn more of what he knows.”

“Would you like me to summon Niglugal through the side entrance?” Ninsubur asked, “so that you may retain a choice of him or Urnungal?”

Ishtar hesitated. “No. If fate has brought Gilgamesh back at this time to Erech, let fate play out its hand.”

* * *

For the following two days Gilgamesh secluded himself in his royal chambers, feverishly dictating to Dubshar, the royal scribe, the tale of his life and adventures and his search for escape from a mortal’s fate. The only one he wished to see was his mother, Ninsun, but she

was restricted to the Sacred Precinct until the New Year festival was over, and Gilgamesh was not allowed in.

When the tenth day began at evetime, he asked that his son join him for the evening meal. They ate silently, for Urnungal waited for his father to speak first and Gilgamesh was absorbed in thought. Only when they had finished eating and the servants were dismissed, did Gilgamesh speak up.

"My son," he said, "to Niglugal and Kaba I have spoken. They told me of the happenings in Erech during my absence. You said that my mother told you the urgent reason for my second journey, to seek the Plant of Life. . . . The cause of the deaths in the Sacred Precinct and that of my malady is one and the same. It is the touching of the Tablet of Destinies, the one that I had pulled out of the handiwork of Anu and that my mother retained for safekeeping."

"I've surmised as much," Urnungal replied.

Gilgamesh nodded his head in approval. "The question is, did Ishtar surmise as much? I know not what explanation my mother has given her regarding the tablet. Therefore, I know not what faces me tomorrow, when I go to her abode for the Sacred Marriage rites. The tablet, after all, was a message from the Lord Anu intended for her."

"On the other hand, she might be pleased by your return, Father," Urnungal said, "and maybe she will even invoke some cure for the divine affliction that's in you."

"Wise words, my son, but alas an unreal hope. Even my mother, the Healer, has no cure for my affliction, and her mother, who heads all Healers, could only suggest the Plant of Life as a remedy. No, my son, whichever way we think, at the same ending we arrive. The only unknown is the timing."

He stood up and went to a chest and brought out of it a round tablet. "Throughout my travails," Gilgamesh said, "I held on to these two objects. One is a faithful replica of the Tablet of Destinies, made by the divine craftsman of the Lady Ninharsag so that its writing might be legible. The guardians of the forbidden zone tested it with their beams, but all they did was scorch it slightly . . ." He showed Urnungal the scorched edge. "It is not the handiwork of Anu, but it is of a divine nature all the same. There is none like it upon the Earth,

and it served me well to convince both the guardians and Ziusudra of the divine blood in my veins. Take it and keep it in your possession!”

“What for?” Urnungal asked.

“Because I know not what awaits me in the Sacred Precinct, that’s why. You see, Urnungal, though I am the king, I am without kingship. My scepter, my crown, all the attributes of kingship, were taken away from me as custom prescribes. Only if I survive the Sacred Marriage rites will I be reinvested with them. Only then will I be able to proclaim my choice of a successor. . . . Until then, I am powerless to speak up, and the throne is legally vacant during these few days.” He ran his hand through his son’s curly hair. “If I should not survive the encounter with Ishtar, this will be your proof that the succession was entrusted to you.”

“Why are you so uncertain of tomorrow’s rites? Is it the malady, or Ishtar’s wrath?”

Gilgamesh smiled wryly. “Tomorrow, my son, I shall fast from sunrise to sundown. At the temple, priests will cleanse me inside and out, scrub my skin and comb my hair and anoint my genitals. . . . When I am finally admitted to the Gigunu, Ishtar’s Place of Nighttime Joy, we will eat seven kinds of fruits and drink a divine nectar. In an adjoining chamber, musicians and singers will offer sweet melodies of love, and Ishtar will pluck the lyre and sing too. Then the Queen of Heaven will lead me to her canopied bed. First I will raise her on a floating bed of ropes, and rocking her to and fro, shall penetrate her fifty times, to arouse her ecstasy and to prove my virility. As her ecstasy mounts she will call on me to join her in the canopied bed, to come unto her as her beloved Dumuzi had done. But should I fail the fifty times, or enter her bed too soon, the light of day I shall not see . . .”

There was a look of disbelief on Urnungal’s face. “A risky affair, it seems,” he finally concluded.

“And utterly divine,” Gilgamesh said, and winked. Then he drew his son closer, embraced him, and kissed him on the forehead. “Now let me be, for I need rest for tomorrow’s strenuous rites.”

* * *

Although he was not to come into the presence of the goddess before sundown, the king was awakened soon after sunrise and without much ado was led to the Sacred Precinct. He neither ate nor drank on this tenth day, for the rites of the Sacred Marriage required him to be cleansed and purified, ridding himself of all that was profane and unsanctified.

At the Sacred Precinct's gate, priests took over from the small group of palace functionaries that had accompanied Gilgamesh. They led him to a special part of the Great Temple for a series of cleansing procedures: scrubbings and ritual baths that assured that his body would be at its purest. His nails were cut; his hair was trimmed and washed and brushed, then rolled into a nape at the back of his head and held in place by a band of spun wool. Then, his body anointed from head to toe with aromatic oils, with special emphasis on his genitals, he was enwrapped in a simple white linen robe and permitted to lie down and relax.

A double-hour before sundown, the final preparations began. The king's body was rubbed with aromatic oils once more, and the attending priests dressed him in the bridegroom's clothes—first a gauzelike white gown, then a blue robe with white fringes. The robe was carefully folded to bare his right shoulder. A multicolored girdle, the traditional gift of the bride, held the robe's folds in place.

As sundown neared, the wedding procession was readied—first the musicians and singers, then the priests holding the golden trays on which the seven kinds of fruits—a gift of the king to the goddess—were carried. Next came the king, flanked by two senior priests, and behind them came the twelve selected Elders who were to serve as the official witnesses that the king had indeed entered the Gipar, Ishtar's House of Comforts.

The priestesses attending the goddess also completed her final preparations. Having been bathed and anointed with scented oils and coiffed, Ishtar was now being dressed, first in the see-through white gown, then in her divine fringed woolen garment. As a final touch, her handmaiden Ninsubar placed around her neck Ishtar's favorite many-layered necklace of lapiz lazuli beads, then handed

her the divine horned helmet, which Ishtar preferred to put on herself.

When all was done, Ninsubar stepped back to view her mistress. With the last rays of the sun gone, the chamber was now bathed in a bluish light, its source unseen. In the sky-colored light that was reflected off the goddess's body and adornments, she looked like the celestial body that she represented on Earth.

"You are indeed godly, a Queen of Heaven!" Ninsubar said. "The king will be enchanted by your divine appearance."

"The king, I am told, is greatly weakened," Ishtar said. "His sins cry to Heaven!"

"But of all men, you love him the most!"

"I loved him, but he has rejected me, and stolen from me Anu's tablet. . . . I have put a curse on him, on Gilgamesh!"

They could now hear the approaching music and singing.

"Will you let him be?" Ninsubar asked.

"The curse, Ninsubar, cannot be undone. To forever seek life and never find it, I have fated him!"

Ninsubar looked puzzled "How can he search forever, and not forever live?"

Ishtar nodded her head. "That, indeed, is a puzzle for fate to solve."

16

When Astra opened her eyes, the first thought that occurred to her was that she was dead, and the next thought, that she was buried alive.

The place was utterly dark and totally silent, and cold. She wanted to turn her head but couldn't, for it was heavy and aching and her neck was stiff. She tried to move her hand but there was an uncommon weariness in her limbs and a stiffness in her fingers—a numbness as that which follows a blocking of circulation. She was lying on her back, and feeling so immobile, she tried to move her lips, to utter a word so that she might know whether she was dead or alive. Her lips, however, were dry and cold, and could not be shaped to utter a coherent sound. But she did let out a kind of a groan, and then knew she was alive.

Alive . . . but where?

I must move, she thought, but she couldn't. With much effort she began to twiddle the fingers of her hands, and after a while she felt circulation returning to them, and then to her arms. Straining, she slowly raised her arms and touched her face with her hands. The touch felt reassuring and she began to rub her cheeks.

The action reduced the numbness in her face and now she could also move her head from side to side, and this relieved the stiffness in her neck. She dropped her hands to her sides and felt about, and realized she was lying on a bed. Shifting her body in a slithery movement she began to slide out of the bed. As her feet stuck out enough to bend and touch the floor, she discovered that she was entangled in some ropes, a kind of a net. She muttered a swear word, wondering what a stupid net of ropes was doing in a bed.

It was at that moment that a flash of memory crossed her mind: she lay in a hammock . . . there was a man, a naked man. She was

rocking, to and fro, to and fro. . . . There was a warmth, spreading upward in her body. . . . It was a warmth, an inner glow. . . .

She shivered. Now, she was cold. There was no warmth, no inner glow. *Was it a dream?*

She slipped out of the bed and stood up. Her feet touched a cold floor. A chill passed through her body and there was another flash of recollection . . . A room. A room filled with artifacts. A lyre. There had been lyre music . . .

But now there was utter silence. Without moving, she looked around. In one place she noticed a glimmer of light and she made her way carefully toward it. When she reached the spot, her extended hands touched a curtain. With an uncertain hand she pulled it aside. There was a window behind the heavy curtain and the light struck Astra's eyes as a hammer's blow. She closed her eyes and, dizzied, held on to the curtain in order not to sway. Then she opened and closed her eyes several times, blinking until she got used to the light.

She turned around and looked at the room. There was a lyre, there were other artifacts. A canopied bed. There was a man on the bed, lying on his side, his face pushed against a pillow. *Eli,* she recalled. *He brought me up here. Last night*.

Last night? Instinctively she looked at her wristwatch. It was twenty to nine.

It was then that she realized she was entirely naked save for a gauzelike, see-through robe. The man in the bed was naked as well.

"Damn!" Astra muttered. "I must've spent the whole damn night here. And now I'll be late for work."

Eli didn't answer. *No wonder the poor fellow is exhausted,* Astra thought. *We must've screwed around the whole night!*

She found her clothes strewn on the floor and dressed in a hurry. *How the hell do I get out of here?* she thought, seeing that Eli was still fast asleep. Now that she had gotten used to the light and could even distinguish the dim parts of the room, she noticed the elevator and a female figure in it. She walked over and saw a lifelike statue, and another memory flashed through her mind. Ishtar, the goddess. .

. . Eli was telling her things, ancient things. . . . She saw it all in a dream after she had fallen asleep . . .

She touched the features of the statue.

“Hey, Eli!” she cried out to him. “Guess what! I dreamt that I was a goddess, like this statue. . . . I was Ishtar, and you were a king—Gilgamesh!” Her shout should have awakened Eli, but it didn’t.

Now Astra felt annoyed. She pushed herself into the elevator beside the statue and pressed a button, then another, but nothing happened. She was getting mad at the prospect of being late for work and was frustrated by feeling caged in.

She stepped out of the elevator and went toward the bed.

“Come on, mister!” she shouted to Eli as she got closer to him. “It’s bugle time! Just get up and let me out of here!”

He ignored, or didn’t hear, her loud words, and she grabbed his hand and pulled it a few times to awaken him. As she let go of his hand, it fell back limply on the bed. *What’s going on here?* Astra thought, apprehension beginning to overtake her. She shook Eli a few times and when even that didn’t help, she bent over, and with some effort turned him over on his back.

His eyes were open but glazed. He was not breathing, though his mouth was half-open. His penis was erect and blue, dark blue. She felt his pulse; there was none.

He was dead.

“Oh my god!” Astra cried out as she stepped back, horrified.

For a few moments she contemplated the dead body, undecided what she should do. She knew had to get out, but how? Frantically she looked about the room again, noticing for the first time a doorknob in one of the walls. She rushed there, and from close up she could see that the wallpaper was laid to make the door indistinguishable. She turned the handle and pulled and the door opened, revealing stairs leading down. It was dark beyond the top stairs, and she felt her way down carefully until she came upon a door at the bottom. She opened it and went through, and saw she was back in the sitting room, which she now recalled from the evening before.

The bluish light that had engulfed the room then was gone, but some light infiltrated from behind heavy curtains and Astra made her way toward it. She looked for her jacket and handbag and found them on the armchair where she had sat. On impulse, she sat down again in the chair.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember what had taken place in this room the evening before. *Her host, now dead, was talking to her, showing slides*. . . . *What was he telling her?* She remembered Baalbek, her childhood, a sixth finger. . . . *He spoke to her at the museum, she accompanied him here. . . . They drank a nectar*. . . . She opened her eyes. Yes, the glasses were still here, on the side table. She had felt an inner warmth, a floating away. *And then? What then?* There was a dazzling scent that went with these recollections, but her sense of smell now reported back an odor of mustiness, and the new odor interfered with the lifting of the fog over her memory.

She looked about the room, trying to regain her bearings. There was the slide projector, another anchor for memories. *Yes, he had told her about the statue. . . . They went upstairs. . . . It was the night of the Sacred Marriage* . . .

The musty smell overwhelmed her and she felt a chill. *Was she remembering correctly or was it all an illusion? Had she dreamt it all?*

She shook her head, picked up her belongings, and made her way toward the stairs. The bluish light that had lit up the stairwell last evening was out, but there was enough daylight coming through narrow windows at alternate landings so that she could find her way. Reaching the exit door she almost stumbled on a pile of papers strewn on the floor. The door was locked, but she found the latch with groping hands and unlocked it. She turned the handle to open the door but it didn’t budge. Frantically Astra pushed against it, and the door opened on a heave.

In the light, she could see that the pile she stumbled on was made up of letters and magazines, which had evidently been thrown in through the mail slot in the door. As she stepped into the alley, closing the door behind her, she noticed the number “6” on it. As she reached the corner, she noticed the street sign: Coptic Mews, off of Coptic Lane.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Astra muttered, wondering whether these were all mere coincidences.

It was still—or again—drizzling, and Astra remembered the hat and coat she had left in the museum the night before. She went to pick them up, but was stopped by a guard at the iron gates.

“The place isn’t open yet to visitors,” he said. “Only readers can come in now.”

“I’ve just come to pick up my hat and coat. I left them last night.”

“All right,” he said, taking a good look at her. “Come on in.”

As she crossed the courtyard she couldn’t help thinking of the previous evening; how she had walked through this very courtyard with a total stranger. *Did he really believe in a destiny that would take us both back to ancient Sumer, or was it just an ingenious way to lure me into his bed?* She nodded her head in disbelief at her own trusting naïveté, shrugged her shoulders, and went up the stairs.

At the checkroom, she produced the plastic chit she had been given the evening before.

“I’m afraid I left my hat and coat here last evening,” she said to the attendant. “Could I have them, please?”

“Why, sure,” the attendant replied. He went back to the racks, and a minute later returned. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but there’s nothing left on this number. Besides”—he looked at her inquisitively—“all the chits for this number are in place. When did you get it?”

“Why, I told you,” Astra said. “Last night, when I was here for the Gilgamesh exhibit.”

The attendant looked at Astra askance. “The Gilgamesh exhibit? There was no such exhibit here last night. Are you sure you’re not mixing us up with some other gallery?”

“Come on,” Astra said nervously. “I’m not crazy, you know. I left my hat and coat here; I checked them in for the exhibit!”

Baffled, the attendant called out to one of the museum guards.

“Hey, Charlie,” he shouted, “there’s a lady here says she was here last night for a Gilgamesh exhibit. Know anything about it?”

The guard came over. “A Gilgamesh exhibit?” he said, staring at Astra. “Yes, we had one, but not last night. It must’ve been at least a

year ago!”

“A year ago?” Astra exclaimed. “It was last evening, here, at this museum!”

“Yes, you’re right, Charlie,” the attendant said. “I remember it now. It was about this time a year ago. They were serving drinks at the coffee shop. . . .”

“This is crazy!” Astra exploded. “Either I get my hat and coat or I talk to a supervisor!”

“Take it easy, Miss,” the attendant said, glancing at the guard. “Whenever it was, your hat and coat aren’t here, and no chit is missing here either. Now, take back your chit and call Lost and Found at the Metropolitan Police. It’s where we send stuff left behind too long.”

“There’s a phone right there, behind the partition,” the guard added, pointing.

Uncomprehending, Astra took the chit back and went where she had been shown. She fished for a coin in her handbag, then remembered she did not need a coin to call the police.

“Which emergency do you require?” an operator answered.

“Police.”

There was some clicking and a deep male voice identified himself as Sergeant Watson, Metropolitan Police.

“I want to report a death,” Astra said, hesitation in her voice.

“A violent death?”

“Oh no . . . it’s a man who died . . .”

“What’s your name, Miss?”

“His name was Eli . . . Elios, that is.”

“I need your name and address. Where are you calling from?”

“Yes . . . number six, Coptic Mews . . . there’s a dead man . . .”

“How did he die? When?”

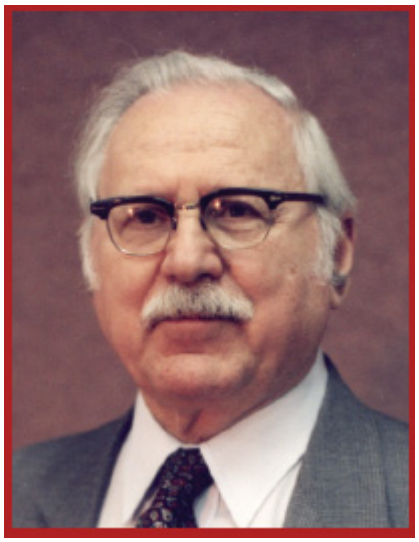
Astra did not respond.

“Hello there, Miss!” the sergeant said urgently. “Do you know when the man died? Today? Yesterday?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Astra whispered. All of a sudden, her voice trailed off and the phone dropped from her hand. She had caught a glimpse of someone familiar over by the coat rack. It was Eli. Had he seen her?

She closed her eyes and opened them again. When she did, he was gone.

About the Author



One of the few scholars able to read and interpret ancient Sumerian and Akkadian clay tablets, ZECHARIA SITCHIN (1920–2010) based his bestselling The 12th Planet on texts from the ancient civilizations of the Near East. Drawing both widespread interest and criticism, his controversial theories on the Anunnaki origins of humanity have been translated into more than 20 languages and featured on radio and television programs around the world.

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